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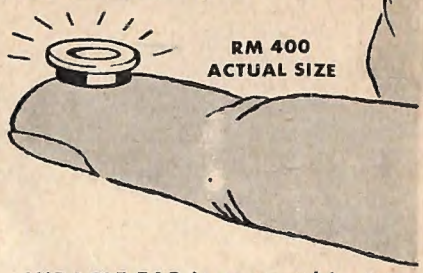

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 64, No. 2 OCTOBER, 1956

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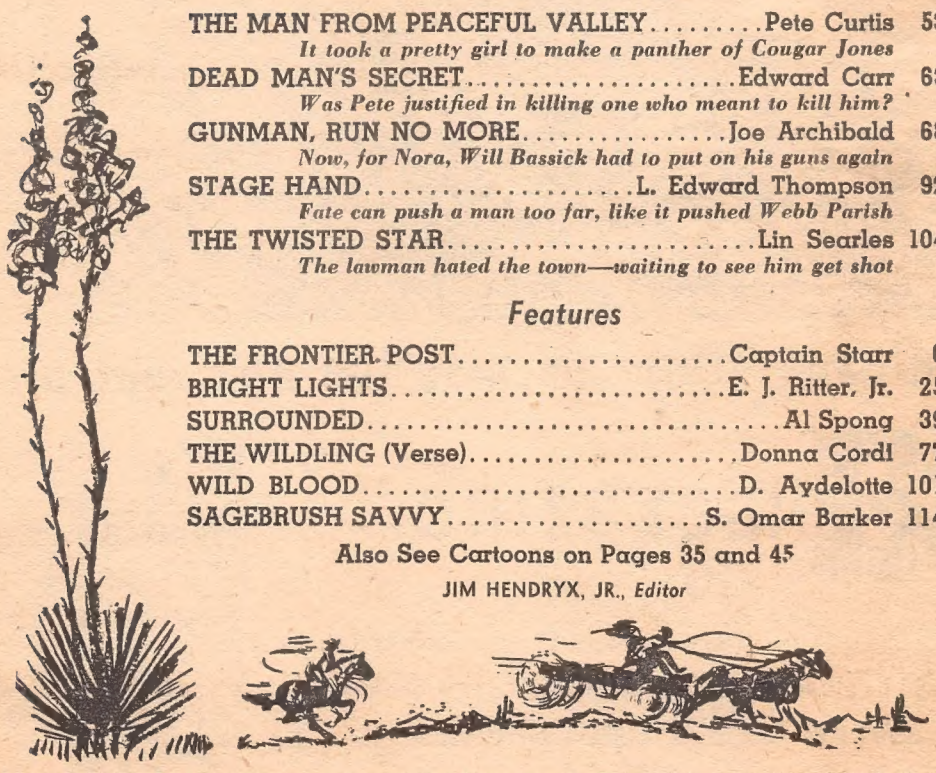

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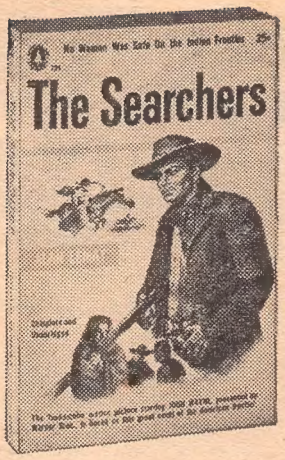

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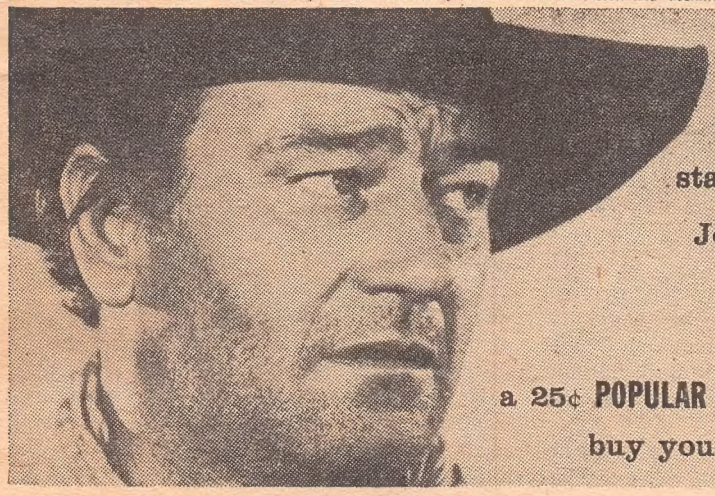

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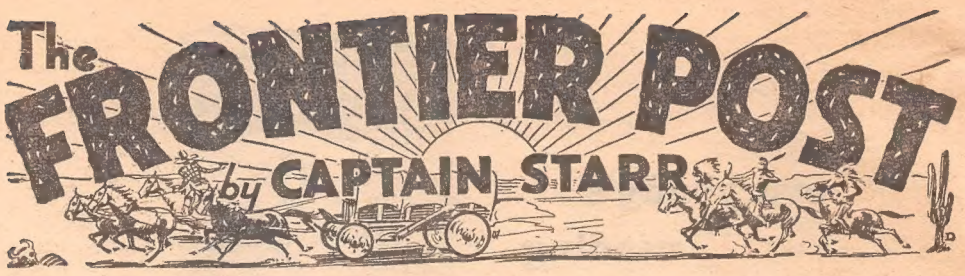


Vendetta of a Mistreated Mexican

JOAQUIN MURIETA! The name struck terror to the hearts of every settler in California in 1850. It meant brutal, wanton murder. There was hardly a man in the territory who dared to tangle with the fiery young Mexican who had only one aim in life—to ruthlessly destroy Americans, however and wherever the opportunity arose.

Murieta was not always such a bloodthirsty savage. Like many another outlaw, his departure from the straight and narrow came about as a result of racial hatred—not his, at first, but of the white men he later hunted.

The Mexican War was still fresh in the minds of unprincipled hoodlums who refused to leave any shred of dignity to the defeated. Their indulgence of their hatred resulted not only in their own deaths, but that of many others, innocent of any such intolerance.

Murieta was a handsome boy of nineteen when he eloped from his father's ranch in Sonora with Rosita Feliz. California became their home, where Joaquin staked a mining claim in the San Joaquin valley.

When the claim proved to be a rich one, several psuedo-vigilantes decided to drive him off so they could jump it. Murieta resisted, but he was outnumbered about twenty to one. While he sat bound hand and foot, watching his wife subjected to degradations too bestial to describe, his mind screamed for revenge.

After the intruders had sated their sadistic desires, they rode off. Joaquin was all for getting vengeance, but Rosita had a cooler head. She persuaded him to pack and leave. The West was wide and there must be some place they could live as respected people.

Rosita was also naive. Their move to Columbia resulted in much the same kind of treatment. They moved next to a small village called Murphy's Diggings, where Murieta got a job as a monte-dealer in a saloon. Here the young couple thought they had at last found peace. But it wasn't to be . . .

One evening while visiting his brother who had moved from Mexico to Murphy's Diggings, Joaquin borrowed a horse for the ride home. A group of miners stopped him and accused him of stealing the horse from one of them. They returned to his brother, who said he had bought the horse from a stranger and had no idea it was stolen.

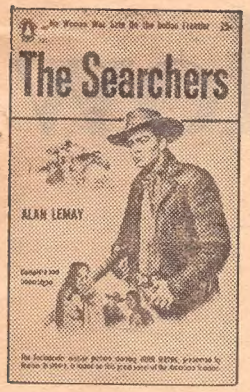
The miners repaid this honesty by grabbing Joaquin's brother and hanging him from the nearest tree. They stripped Joaquin, tied him to the same tree and whipped him until blood flowed in a river down his back.

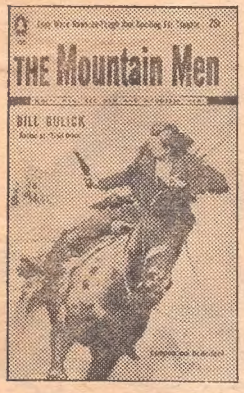
The miners who took part in this perverted form of frontier justice noticed the look on Murieta's face as they beat him. His deep-set dark eyes were taking into his memory the faces of every man involved, his heart even then dedicating itself to their torture and death.

Murieta's brother was buried in the local cemetery. In the fading light of a blood-reddened sky, Joaquin knelt beside the open grave, a bowie knife clasped in his upraised hands. His words were intended only for the dead brother, but their meaning would have struck terror into the hearts of every man in Murphy's Diggings if they had heard them.

He dedicated his future life, whatever there might be of it, to bringing torturous death to the twenty men who had killed his brother and beaten him, to make them pay and pay for this outrage against him and his race.

Thus began the reign of terror in California of Murieta's madness, till every one of the twenty men guilty of killing Joaquin's brother were murdered. California paid a $10,000 reward for the head of a man who looked like Murieta, but those who had known him well scoffed, said the head was not his, that Murieta had retired to Mexico.





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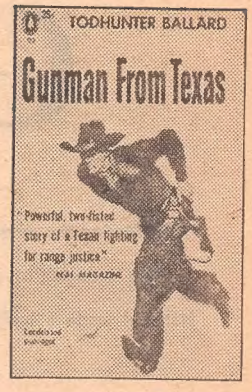
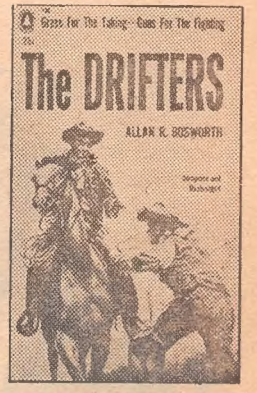
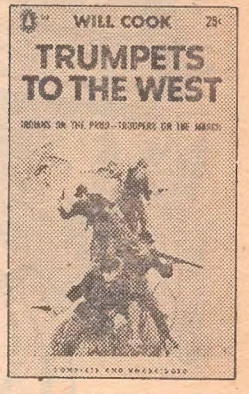
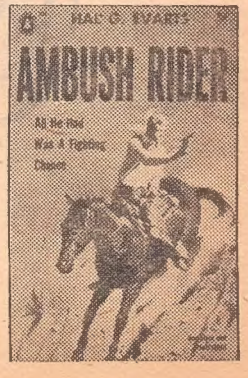


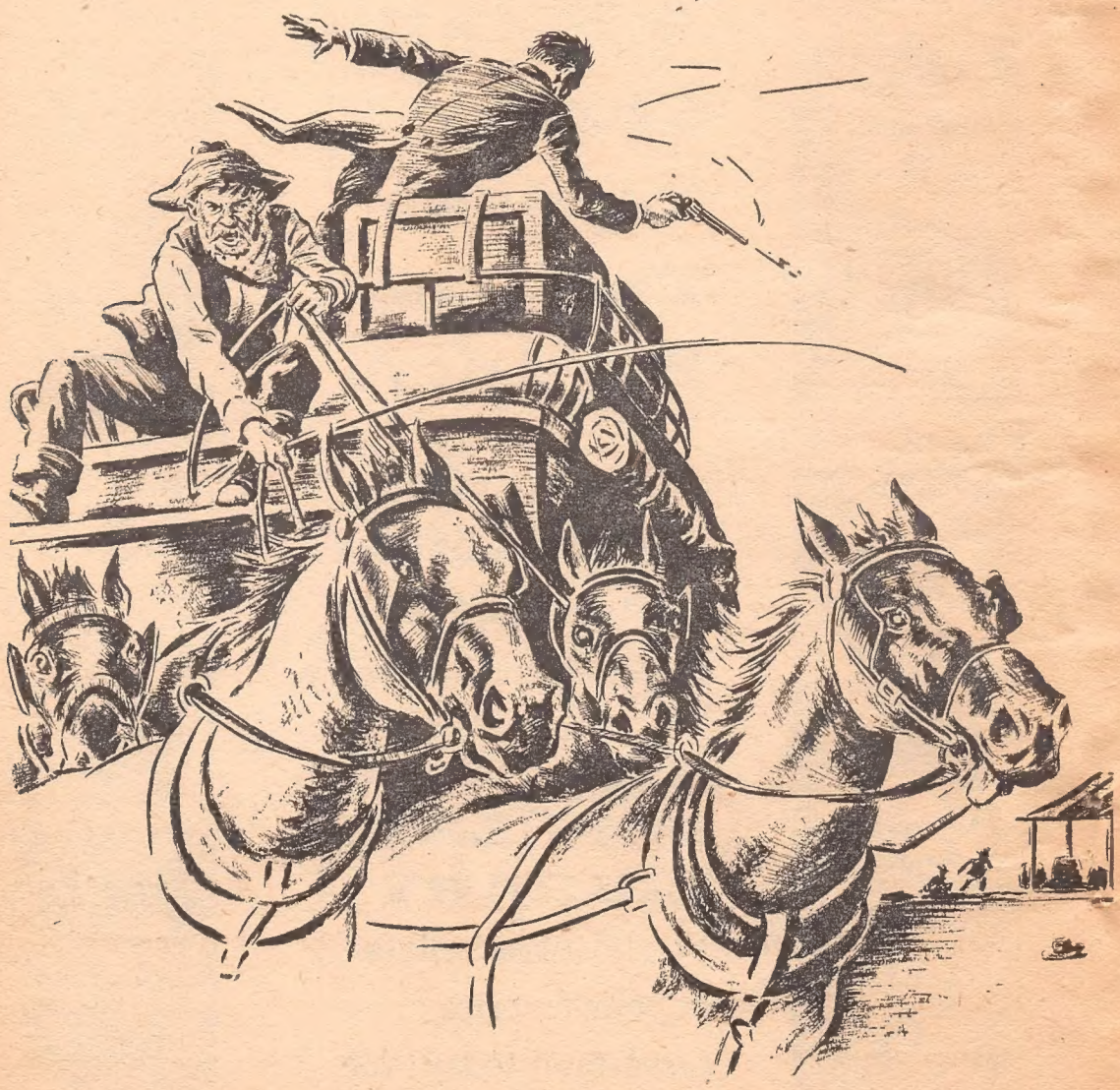






Guns Below

Considering the range and
the jouncing stage
Hatfield made a lucky shot



the Border

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Suicide Assignment

THE cryptic telegram from Ranger headquarters had instructed Jim Hatfield to pick up secret orders awaiting him at the remote Big Bend settlement called Rio Grande Junction. Hard riding from Fort Stockton for a day and a half had brought him, at sunset, to the stony ridge which overlooked Junction's tit-tat-toe pattern of streets on the flats below.

Reining up to give his golden sorrel mount one last breather, Hatfield lifted a gloved hand to unpin the silver star on his workshirt. From Junction southward he would be in territory where a law badge could be its wearer's death warrant. Leaving that aside, Hatfield always preferred

Across the Border and back again rode the Lone Wolf, well aware that the gun-runners he sought wanted him dead and deep-buried

working undercover at any time, usually posing as a roving cowhand. It was that habit which had won him the nickname of the Lone Wolf throughout the Lone Star country, although he had been personally dubbed with the appellation by his own superior officer in the Rangers, peppery old Cap'n Bill McDowell.

Down there in Junction—a town he had visited but once in his life, and that several years ago—Jim Hatfield knew but one man personally. Ted Dawe, the marshal. Right at present he had no way of knowing if Dave was still in office, or even alive.

Sundown painted window glass scarlet. It gleamed on the serpentine streak of steel which was the overland railroad, looping out of the eastern badlands, cutting the town in half, and disappearing westward toward El Paso.

Branching out from Junction, like the legs of a tarantula, were the stage routes which linked remote Big Bend settlements with the railroad. One of these—the road leading south to Spanish Crossing on the Rio Grande River—Jim Hatfield would be riding tomorrow, heading toward a mystery which could well be among the most dangerous and challenging he had ever been called upon to solve.

Cap'n McDowell had sent his coded telegram from Ranger headquarters in Austin to Hatfield at Fort Stockton, seat of Pecos County, where he was engaged on another case. The message, while not specific, had tipped him off that he had been selected to handle a top-priority case which fellow Rangers had frankly dubbed a "suicide assignment."

It had read:

POSSIBLE BREAK IN TRIPLE R CASE HAS TURNED UP AT SPANISH CROSSING. PICK UP DETAILED ORDERS AT FRONTIER HOTEL IN RIO GRANDE JUNCTION. USE ALIAS SIX. PROCEED WITH UTMOST SECRECY.

THE "Triple R case" was a sort of code name which the Rangers themselves had given a matter which for the past two years had been engaging the attention of the United States Border Patrol and customs officers, as well as their counterparts on the Mexican side of the Border.

"Triple R" meant, in Ranger slang, "Rebel Rifle Running." It summed up the steady flow of illegal American arms shipments into Mexico which was enabling General Heraclio Delgado's guerilla *rebelistas* to carry on their revolution against Chihuahua and Coahuila provinces in the face of all both American and Mexican authorities could do to discourage them.

As a frustrated Border Patrol official in El Paso had told Jim Hatfield only recently, "We know the rifles—new Winchesters packed in their original factory grease—are reaching Delgado, south of the Border. We know they're not being smuggled across the New Mexican or Arizona borders, or reaching the revolutionists by way of gun-runners operating on the Gulf coast of Mexico. Which narrows it down to Texas and the Rio Grande. But how, or where, or even when—we're in the dark. We're licked."

The Texas Rangers were not primarily concerned with Border work alone, but they had had their try at the Triple R mystery during the past year. At least one Ranger had died while working on the gun-running case—Matt Weaver, a second-generation Ranger who had trained with Jim Hatfield at Menard Barracks under the tutelage of old Captain Gabe Weaver, Matt's father.

Ranger Matt Weaver had been shot in the back down at Spanish Crossing, on the Rio Grande. And Spanish Crossing was to be Jim Hatfield's destination, Captain McDowell's telegram had hinted . . .

"We might as well amble, Goldy," Hatfield told his big stallion. "No use delaying your oats after the kind of forage you've had the last couple of days."

The Lone Wolf secreted his Ranger badge inside the lining of his left cowboot, in accordance with McDowell's warning to "proceed with utmost secrecy." Somewhere along the line Matt Weaver must have been careless enough to let the outlaw world know he was a Ranger, and the slip had cost him his life. His murder had occurred in a deserted graveyard—fitting

perhaps, but doubly gruesome.

Dusk was deepening in purple layers like smoke haze over the town as Hatfield rode in. The gleam of a freight locomotive's headlight, shunting cattle cars onto a siding, picked out a barn bearing a sign that read:

EINAR LARSON'S LIVERY
"HORSES CALL IT HEAVEN."

"You deserve the best, Goldy," Hatfield chuckled as he turned in at Larson's. A hostler with straw-yellow hair and a broad-boned Scandinavian face, rare on the Border, took the sorrel for grooming and graining.

The hostler seemed to study Hatfield more intently than was necessary, but it didn't matter. Hatfield was sure he was indistinguishable from any tumbleweed rider. He removed his bulky bullhide chaps and left them with his saddle gear, but the rest of his garb was strictly cow-country—spurred Coffeyville boots inlaid with Texas Lone Star designs, hickory work shirt stained with sweat crystals and dusty with the soda and potash picked up on his desert crossing; faded bibless levis, flat-crowned gray stetson stained with the smoke of uncounted lonely campfires.

The stag-handled Colt .45s holstered at his flanks were common enough to the time and the place; other than a casual glance to see if the backstraps bore notches, the hostler paid Hatfield's shooting irons no notice.

"Ridin' south?" he asked. It was a loaded question, and Hatfield realized it.

"Maybe," he said evasively. "Only thing I know for sure, dark has caught me in your town. Can you recommend a bunkhouse for a saddle-tired man?"

Stripping saddle and blanket off Goldy, the hostler gestured down-street with a dip of his head.

"Only hotel in town's the Frontier, but it's got a fair dining room and no bugs in the mattresses. If you're looking for a mite of entertainment—"

"I'm not," Hatfield cut off the swamper. "Too ga'nted out for poker, dancing girls or anything else except some grub and shuteye."

WITH no other luggage than his saddle-bags, Hatfield turned in at the first restaurant he came to, ate heartily, and then, with full darkness bringing out the lights up and down a main street bisected by the Overland Southern railroad tracks, he crossed over to the Frontier Hotel, Baldy Cragghorn, Prop.

JIM HATFIELD

Under the overhang of the hotel's wooden awning the usual crowd of whittlers and loafers had gathered. Their blank stares followed the six-foot stranger as he came up the spur-scuffed plank steps, *alforjas* slung over his shoulders. They saw a lean, sun-bronzed man of indeterminate age—anywhere from twenty-five to thirty-five. He walked with the stilted, rolling gait of a range rider who was more at home in the saddle than afoot,

and was shod accordingly. Women found that lean, sun-bronzed man attractively handsome; men held a subconscious respect for a powerful build and the self-confidence that went with strength.

The porch was unlighted, but the fan-wise glare of yellow lamplight spilling from the hooked-back lobby door picked up the blue-black highlights of the stranger's hair, the peculiar greenish glints, like fractured glass, that shone in his eyes when the light struck them at a certain angle.

A fat, bald-headed man with a tame magpie sitting on his shoulder occupied the rocking chair nearest the door, half in and half out of the bar of light. He made no sign of noticing the arrival of this tall stranger, but the moulting bird squawked "Tinhorn sport, tinhorn sport!" to the vast merriment of the loafers assembled on the Frontier's porch to enjoy the first cool breath of evening.

"The magpie may be right, at that," chuckled Hatfield, and trailed his spurs on into the hotel. "I been called worse."

He found the lobby deserted, stuffy with the pent-up heat of the long day just ending. The fat man with the talking bird lifted himself from his rocker with a groan and followed Hatfield inside. In the light he stood revealed as a pink-faced, totally bald man of fifty-odd, wearing a sweat-plastered candy-stripe shirt and moleskin pants tucked into elastic-sided Wellington shoes.

"Dollar a day, five bucks a week," he grunted, shoving the register across the cigarette-burned reception counter.

Hatfield flipped the man a silver cartwheel, dipped a pen in a sticky ink bottle, and signed the hotel register with the "number six alias" prescribed by the wire from Headquarters:

Jed Harkness, Running W Ranch, Dalhart, Tex.

The fat man tossed Hatfield a key to Room 8. "Name's Baldy Cragghorn," he said. "Owner of the house. I also operate a string of freight wagons out of Junction. I'm short o' drivers. Forty a month and found, if you're interested, and it's steady work."

Hatfield said, "Thanks, but I'm a saddle man, not a wagoneer. I was wondering if maybe—"

"Tinhorn sport!" accused the magpie. "Place your bets!"

"I was wondering if any mail had come to me here, Cragghorn. I gave your hotel as a forwarding address when I left the Panhandle a month ago. Cattleman recommended this bunkhouse."

Cragghorn checked the name Hatfield had signed, then turned to a pigeon-hole rack. Sorting through a sheaf of letters, most of them dog-eared with much handling, he came up with a fresh white envelope postmarked Austin.

"Deliver the mail, Blackie," Cragghorn said, as the magpie snatched the letter in its beak. Because its left wing was short-clipped to make extended flying impossible, the bird hopped down to the counter, waddled over to Hatfield and laid the letter in his hand with a derisive squawk.

"Much obliged, Blackie," Hatfield chuckled, pocketing the letter without glancing at it. It contained, he knew, his official coded orders from Captain Roaring Bill. "A remarkable bird you have there, Cragghorn."

With a great flutter of wings the magpie flew back to its perch on the fat man's shoulder.

"You'd ought to be around to see how a drunk acts when this magpie looks him in the eye and calls him a tinhorn sport," Cragghorn said. "He was raised in Chihuahua, talked nothing but Mexican when I first got him. What English he knows now he got from me . . . Porter will be up directly with your towels, Mr. Harkness. Room 8's at the front of the hall, upstairs on your left."

AS THE Lone Wolf shouldered his saddle pouches and headed up the creaky lobby stairs the magpie said, "Tinhorn sport. Never draw to an inside straight, awwwrrk!"

He had hardly disappeared when the door behind Cragghorn's desk, marked

MANAGER, opened and a swarthy-faced half-breed, wearing a lemon-yellow shirt and sisal straw sombrero, cautiously let himself out of the office.

"Signed the book Jed Harkness," Cragghorn said. "It's him. No question of it in my mind, Chisos."

The *mestizo* pursed his mouth dubiously. "If he's a Ranger, then why wasn't he wearing his star, Señor Cragghorn?"

Grunting with effort, Cragghorn reached on a shelf under the counter and came up with a cake of soap and two threadbare towels marked "Frontier Hotel" and "El Paso Hotel," respectively.

"Jim Hatfield's famous for working undercover—and alone," Cragghorn grunted. "That's why he's nicknamed the Lone Wolf."

From a hip pocket of his bibless levis, Chisos lifted a pair of tiny presentation model .41 derringers with short barrels and shiny rosewood handles. One of the guns he returned to his pocket; in the breech of the other he slipped a cartridge.

"Is he heading for Spanish Crossing?" the breed asked.

"Don't know," Cragghorn said. "I didn't ask any questions, but Einar Larson said when he came into the livery tonight, and Einar asked him if he was heading south, he said he didn't know."

Chisos was silent a moment, staring abstractedly at the letter rack behind Cragghorn. Then he said, "You gave him the letter?"

Cragghorn nodded, reaching up to stroke the moulting, ragged plumage of his pet magpie. "Yeah. He's posin' as a tumbleweed saddle tramp. But him claiming that letter postmarked Austin, that cinches it."

The *mestizo* grinned. "Sure. Why would an ordinary cowhand be getting letters written in secret code like that one was?"

Baldy Cragghorn glanced at the lobby stairs, then at his wall clock.

"He's had time to read that letter through a couple times, Juan. Here. . . . You know what to do."

A pulse throbbed on Juan Chisos' dusky throat as he transferred his .41 derringer to his left hand and, with his right, reached out to take the towels Cragghorn handed him. Very carefully he arranged the folds of the towels to hang over his forearm, completely masking his hand and the little gun it contained.

"Remember," Cragghorn said, "it would help if you could get him to translate that letter. Under a gun drop, even the great Jim Hatfield might break. Just remember that General Delgado pays off big for good jobs well done. And getting Jim Hatfield out of the way would be big—very big."

Juan Chisos' lips curled derisively. "Generalissimo Delgado pays off in talk, not dinero, Señor Baldy. How many Winchesters have we turned over to the rebelistas in the last six months? Two million dollars' worth, according to Delgado. But do you get any money? Do I get any money?"

Cragghorn held up a fat palm to silence the breed's rebellious outburst.

"Close hobble that kind of talk, fool. Delgado will soon be in control of Mexico. When he is, he will not forget those who helped him get that control. Now move along—and be careful!"

CHAPTER II

Secret Orders

ROOM 8 was typical of hundreds in which Hatfield had slept from one end of Texas to the other. The drabness of its skimpy furnishings and unpainted board-and-bat walls mainly accounted for the depression he always felt when obliged to sepnd the night under such a roof. Give him a bedroll spread out under the stars, any old time.

Waiting for Baldy Cragghorn to send up soap and towels, Hatfield propped the single window open for ventilation, turned up the wick of the oil lamp, and ripped open the letter addressed to "Jed Harkness," the No. 6 alias Captain McDowell

had chosen to use in his initial telegram.

He held the back side of the envelope up closer to the light, studying it.

"Could have been steamed open," he decided, then shrugged it off. His nerves were getting boogery already, suspecting employes of a cowtown hotel of tampering with his mail. Besides, even if this letter had been opened and resealed, the contents would make no sense to anyone but himself. A lot of years had passed since Hatfield had first memorized the substitute letter code which McDowell preferred to use in secret communications to his men in the field—"x" was used for "f;" the numeral "2" meant the vowel "a," and so on. And it had to be admitted the code was as effective now as it had ever been.

Hatfield stretched out on the sagging straw tick and unfolded McDowell's letter. With the ease of long practise he translated the mixed-up jumble of letters and figures as he went along. He came up with:

> Jim—This has reference to the Triple R case, an assignment I promised you some time back in case a lead developed. You are already familiar with the background of the matter—how this revolutionary leader, General Delgado, is attempting what everyone is always trying to do—overthrow the existing regime in Mexico. But this time, because his armies are being supplied illegally with American arms and ammunition, Delgado could very well seize control of the republic.
>
> As you of course further know, Delgado's equipment is being smuggled across the border by a well-organized band of gun runners. A year ago this office assigned Matthew Weaver out of El Paso to investigate this case. As you also know, Matt was murdered down in Spanish Crossing, which has about knocked our beloved old Captain Gabriel Weaver to the edge of the rim, I'm afraid.

Hatfield grinned nostalgically. Captain Gabe Weaver was well over ninety now. His history was practically the history of Texas. He was a hero of Vera Cruz; he had helped found the Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers. It was Gabe Weaver who had sworn in his own son, Matt, and Jim Hatfield, as rookies at Menard Barracks. Gabe Weaver would always be a hero to the Lone Wolf.

He continued his mental translation of the coded letter:

> We at Headquarters have just received a letter from old Gabe's granddaughter down in Spanish Crossing—a woman named Linda Bartlett. Shortly after Matt's murder the old man went down there to hunt Matt's killer—a hopeless task for a man so near the century mark, but you know Gabe! Miss Bartlett followed him to Spanish Crossing, obtained work in a bakery shop, and is taking care of the old man.
>
> Miss Bartlett informs me that her grandfather insists he has solved the gun-running mystery; in his words, Delgado's Winchesters "are smuggled below the Border right here in Spanish Crossing." Gabe refuses to divulge any details to "a loose-tongued woman"—meaning his granddaughter—other than that the Texas outlaw, Fancy Dan Kelso, is implicated in the gun-running syndicate.
>
> For your information, Jim, Fancy Dan Kelso now runs a big gambling casino in Villa Segovia, Chihuahua, the town across the river from Spanish Crossing.

THE name, Fancy Dan Kelso, revived vivid memories in Hatfield. Kelso had fled to Mexico to escape Ranger justice, years ago. There was insufficient evidence to extradite the man back to America to stand trial. . . . Hatfield turned back to the closing paragraphs of his letter:

> Your assignment, then, is to proceed in strict secrecy to Spanish Crossing. Old Gabe Weaver demands that Jim Hatfield be assigned to the case and no other Ranger. You may very well find that Weaver has been suffering from senile hallucinations. But we cannot afford to overlook even the most far-fetched possibility—

Hatfield broke off from reading the final lines of the code letter as the thud of footsteps walking up the outer hallway distracted his attention. The footsteps came to a halt in front of the door of Room 8.

Knuckles rapped on the flimsy door and an oily Mexican gutteral, common to the peon class along the Border, called thickly: "Senor Harkness?"

Hatfield thrust the letter under the bedcovers and swung his legs off the bed.

"Who is it?"

"I breeng your soap and towels, señor."

The door swung open to reveal a heavy-set half-breed in a dirty yellow shirt and frayed sombrero, over whose right arm was draped a pair of non-too-clean-looking towels.

"Bath house outside, señor," the hotel porter said. "Take ten minute to carry out hot water. When you weesh to take bath?"

Hatfield rubbed the two-day stubble on his jaw and scowled reflectively.

"Aim to visit the barber shop directly," he said, "and I'll give myself a soaking in their tub. Just lay the towels on the—"

The Lone Wolf got his first inkling of danger when he saw the *mestizo* close the door behind him with a deft swipe of a sandaled heel. Hatfield came to his feet, rope-calloused hands splayed over gun stocks, but he did not attempt to draw. He knew, even before this fake hotel porter started to lift the towels off his forearm, that he was already covered by a gun hidden under those towels.

It's already started! the wild thought ran through Hatfield's brain. I let myself be caught off guard—

In the next instant he had his proof. The taut-lipped half breed shook off the towels, revealing the black bore of the malignant-looking little .41 derringer clutched in his fist, the hammer dogged back to full cock.

Hatfield knew bluffing would get him nowhere, but he said anyway, "What is this? I'm not packing a money belt on me. You won't find more than five bucks in my jeans—"

The *mestizo* came forward warily until he stood at the foot of the bed.

"I am Juan Chisos," he introduced himself, pausing as if he expected Hatfield to react to the name. Getting no such reaction, the breed went on, "And you, señor, are Jeem Hatfield, the *Rangero*. El Capitan Weaver is waiting for you, no?"

Hatfield had not moved his hands upward before the threat of Chisos' derringer. To hear this grinning peon call his true name was a stunning blow, but it pointed up the fact that Captain Weaver's call for Ranger assistance had been based on something more than senile delusions.

"You will unbuckle the gun-belts, Señor Hatfield," Chisos ordered, "and throw your guns under the bed, no?"

The blow lifted the breed off his sandaled feet.

A glimmer of hope touched the Lone Wolf. If this Juan Chisos had been sent here to assassinate him before he could ever reach Spanish Crossing, he could just as well shoot and get it over with. Instead, Chisos, it would appear, desired to pow-wow with his intended victim first.

"Why do you call me Hatfield?" the Ranger asked, gingerly fingering the buckles of his twin ammunition belts. "Just because my initials are J.H.?"

CHISOS did not reply until he saw Hatfield drop both six-guns to the floor and scoop them under the bed with a boot toe.

"You are the Lone Wolf," Chisos said flatly. "*El Capitan* Weaver, down at Spanish Crossing, he send for you, *no es verdad?* This much I know. Other things I do not know. But you will tell me."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed reflectively. Captain McDowell had urged him in both telegram and letter to arrive in Spanish Crossing and contact Weaver in strict secrecy. Apparently though, news of his coming had already leaked out, down on the Rio Grande, and General Delgado's gun-runners had come north fifty miles to waylay him.

"How's that again?" The Lone Wolf feigned puzzlement. "Who is this Captain Weaver? I've never been to Spanish Crossing."

Chisos' shoe-button eyes were darting around the room, hunting for something he could not locate. He said, "Where is the letter you were reading when I knock at the door, señor?"

"What letter?"

The *mestizo's* flicking glance spotted the corner of a sheet of paper protruding from under the edge of the quilt next to Hatfield's pillow. In swinging his legs off the bed, Hatfield had inadvertently exposed a corner of the hidden letter.

"I lay my cards on the table, Hatfield," Chisos said. "The letter you hide under the soogans, already I have seen it. But it is in code. You will read it to me. *Andale!*"

Hatfield's neck-hairs prickled with apprehension. His vague hunch had been right—the envelope *had* been steamed open. Leaning down to reach for the paper, he halted as Chisos barked out warily:

"No—I get the letter! You may have the gun hidden under the peelow, *si*. Turn your back to me, Señor *Rangero*."

Hatfield obeyed, his mind groping for some semblance of a pattern in what was happening to him. Was it possible Gabe Weaver, bereft of his sanity because of grief for his murdered son, had deliberately baited Hatfield into a death trap? From the onset of the Triple R case the retired Ranger had wanted Hatfield assigned to the case that had cost Matt Weaver his life.

He heard Chisos sliding along the opposite side of the bed, carefully keeping out of Hatfield's reach. Reaching over, the *mestizo* snatched the McDowell letter out from under the blankets.

Hatfield turned to face the Mexican, apparently completely at ease. "I'm a cattle buyer," he told Chisos, "and that letter contains instructions from my boss on how much I'm to bid at a stock auction over in Presidio next week."

Chisos grinned derisively.

"Down in Spanish Crossing," he said, "there is this old man, this very old man, named El Capitan Weaver. He tells it around town that his grand-daughter wrote to the Texas Rangers asking them to send the famous Lone Wolf, Jeem Hatfield, down to Spanish Crossing. The only way to reach Spanish Crossing is by way of Junction, *no?* So I ride up the trail to wait for you."

Hatfield's eyes did not reveal the despair that rode him. Old Gabe Weaver's loose tongue had nullified whatever efforts Hatfield had made to keep his identity secret.

Chisos carried the letter over to the wash stand and laid it on the cracked marble top beside the oil lamp. Pointing toward the paper with his derringer, he said, "I have already seen this letter, señor. I know it is in code. You will read

it to me. And do not pretend it is from a cattle buyer. I will know if you lie to me."

Hatfield walked over to the wash stand, but he did not pick up the letter.

"If you steamed open that letter," he said, "I'm surprised you didn't hold it up to a mirror. That's all you had to do. Try it."

It was a wild gamble to divert this breed's attention.

"Read it in a mirror?" Chisos had the intellect of a child; he was piqued by Hatfield's suggestion. He stepped in, reaching for the paper, and holding it by thumb and forefinger he lifted it, peering at the reflected image over the wash stand glass.

THE derringer, bare inches from his body, was still pointed at the Lone Wolf, and the cocked hammer could explode the .41 cartridge in an instant if the breed's finger tensed on the trigger. But it was a chance Hatfield had to take, and he made his gamble now, during the fleeting interval of time it would take Chisos to focus his eyes on the backward-reading letter in the mirror.

Hatfield's left arm came out and down in a slapping motion which clubbed the derringer from the *mestizo's* grasp. It slammed to the floor without exploding and slid out of sight under the wash stand. In the next instant, Hatfield's looping uppercut connected with Juan Chisos' jawbone even as Chisos jerked his head around.

The blow did not land solidly because Chisos was spinning, but the impact of it was enough to lift the breed off his sandal soles and send him staggering, spinning one full turn, to smash into the partition wall with a shock that seemed to vibrate the whole building. Sliding down the wall he came to a sitting posture.

Hatfield came boring in, diving with the intention of knocking Chisos out before he had time to recover from the paralyzing effects of the Ranger's first punch. But he had miscalculated the force of his blow—or of Chiso's recuperative powers. For the next instant Hatfield's flying body was landing, not on Chisos' prone form, but on a pair of doubled-back legs which now drove a pair of feet like twin sledgehammers against the Ranger's descending chest.

Hatfield felt the pure shock of pain go through him as the stunning blow arched him backward in a looping somersault, so powerful had been the thrust of Chiso's straightening legs.

He felt the floor jar under him as he rolled over and propped himself up. The wind was knocked out of him and his vision was faulty, as if he were looking at Chisos through a dirty pane of wavy window glass; but his eyes told him what he was up against.

Chisos, momentarily out of the play, was a deadly threat now. Lamplight glinted on the ten-inch blade of the *mestizo's* bowie knife as Chisos regained his feet, snatching the blade from some hiding place inside his yellow shirt and cradling it in cupped palm and fingers, his thumb pressing down on the haft.

Hatfield had encountered knife-throwing experts from Mexico before, and felt a wash of pure horror go through him, the skin-crawling, clammy kind of fear that any frontiersman knows who has seen a knife expert slash his opponent to ribbons.

The Ranger saw Chisos' arm flash past his thigh and poise at the backsweep of his stroke, like a bowler getting ready to launch a bowling ball down an alley.

As if in slow motion, Hatfield peered up through tousled hair to see Chisos' arm beginning its downward and forward arc.

He twisted violently to one side as the *cuchillo* left Chisos' hand. The blade, zipping though space at an incalculable rate of speed, was a mere streak of light angling down at Hatfield's sideward-rolling body.

Chisos howled a *pelado* oath as he saw his knife miss target and plow into the cross-grain flooring, vibrating like a plucked harpstring, the bone handle of the weapon a smeared blur alongside Hatfield's face.

With incredible agility, Chisos launched himself across the room—but not at Jim Hatfield.

His attention was all for Hatfield's twin Colt .45s, lying just under the bed, where, a few moments before, the Ranger had dropped them.

Even as Hatfield regained his balance and sat up, he knew he could not beat the half-breed to these guns. Chisos made a running dive past him, hands outstretched toward the cedar butts of those heavy revolvers.

Something white was fluttering down out of space, distracting enough to catch Hatfield's eye. It was McDowell's letter, which Chisos had dropped at the instant Hatfield's fist had collided with his chin; it had not yet had time to flutter to the floor, so rapidly had events moved in the past few seconds.

BUT the letter, coming to rest at the foot of the wash stand, directed Hatfield's eye toward the brown rosewood handle of Chisos' forgotten derringer, lying just inside the shadow of the wash stand.

Hatfield's right arm snaked out to snatch the .41 out from under the wash stand.

He was on his back and turning, using his other elbow as a fulcrum, when he saw Chisos spinning around with a Colt sixgun in either hand.

Shoulders braced, the Ranger held his sitting position against the edge of the bed. Chisos was swinging Hatfield's guns around for a point-blank shot. This was a kill-or-die situation, and, however much the Lone Wolf might have wanted to take this *mestizo* alive for questioning, he couldn't risk it. Not when he had only a single-shot pistol between him and eternity.

Lifting the little derringer, Hatfield tripped the trigger.

The little weapon's blast was cannon-loud in the confines of the hotel room, numbing Hatfield's ear-drums; the recoil was enough to knock his hand at an upward angle, the concussion lifting the flame on the wick of a lamp nearly six feet away.

Then the feeble glare of the lamp recovered, brightened; and through the sifting layers of powdersmoke Hatfield saw the first gout of blood, wine-red, gush from the hole the .41 slug had torn through the hairy breastbone visible under Chisos' unbuttoned and dirty yellow shirt.

The heavy Colt revolvers in Chisos' hands tripped their muzzles downward, rocking the trigger guard around the half-breed's crooked forefingers. And then Chisos' snake-wicked eyes seemed to film over and his head sagged. The weight of the unfired sixguns became too much for frozen arm muscles to support, and they dropped, thudding noisily, to the floor.

The half-breed who had been sent to Junction to waylay a Texas Ranger here tonight slumped sideward, his blood staining his soiled yellow shirt like red ink.

Slowly and gently Chisos' dead body settled on the floor, the tension relaxing from taut muscles, the eyelids half closing over snake-bright orbs.

With the stench of gunsmoke in his nose, Jim Hatfield came shakily to his feet, staring as if mesmerized at the bowie knife stuck in the floor boards between him and the dead man. The blade was still vibrating, so recently had it hurtled into the wood, like a button playing a macabre game of mumbly-peg.

Hatfield stared down at the derringer in his hand. A name was engraved on the blued steel barrel: *Juan Chisos, Villa Segovia, Chihuahua.*

Villa Segovia . . . That was the squalid Mexican town across the river from Spanish Crossing.

Men were sprinting up the stairs from the lobby and along the hall to the door of Room 8. Boots thudded to a halt and a gun muzzle rapped hard on the flimsy wooden panels.

"Open up!" an authoritative voice shouted at Hatfield. "This is the law speaking!"

CHAPTER III

To Escort a Corpse

BEFORE Hatfield could speak the door slammed open before a ramming shoulder which splintered the lock. Framed there was the stocky, red-mustached marshal of Rio Grande Junction, Ted Dawe, the only man in this whole territory whom Hatfield had known personally.

Clutching a sawed-off shotgun, the lawman's first glance went to the dead man on the floor, then his eyes and the twin-bored muzzle of the Greener swung to cover Hatfield.

Behind Dawe, two men from the front porch loafers' brigade came to a puffing stop. Obviously they had heard the slam and crash of battle upstairs and morbid curiosity had drawn them here.

"Stand back!" Marshal Dawe flung over his shoulder to them. "Who—" Dawe broke off, as he got his first good look at the man before him in Room 8. Recognition was in his eyes. Then, before the Ranger could do anything to stop him from revealing his identity, the marshal blurted in blended gladness and relief,

"Jim Hatfield! I didn't have any idea you were in town!"

The floor shook to the approach of Baldy Cragghorn, who elbowed past the men in the doorway just as Dawe was easing down the double hammers of his buckshot gun and squinting down at the dead man.

"Great bellerin' bullfrawgs, Jim!" Ted Dawe exclaimed. "You know who you kilt here?"

Hatfield glanced beyond Dawe to see Baldy Cragghorn's reaction. The hotel keeper was shocked numb. There was no reading what was going on behind those deepsocketed porcine eyes.

"You might ask Cragghorn, marshal," Hatfield said coldly. "The dead man came up to my room—not dead then, of course, to kill me—on Cragghorn's orders, for all I know. Leastwise he pretended to be the hotel porter."

Marshal Dawe tore his gaze away from the spreading puddle of crimson forming alongside Chisos' body and turned to face the hairy-jowled hotel man.

"Juan Chisos tried to bushwhack a Texas Ranger on your say-so, Cragghorn?" the lawman demanded incredulously.

Baldy Cragghorn stepped inside the room, growled an oath at the morbid onlookers out in the hall, and eased the door shut. Wiping moist palms on the legs of his pants, the hotel proprietor said to Ted Dawe:

"Hear my side of the story, Marshal, before you go accusing me of anything irregular. To begin with —" Cragghorn jerked a thumb toward Hatfield—"I didn't know this man was a Ranger. He signed my book by the name of Harkness, of Dalhart."

"How about Chisos?" Dawe asked sharply, meeting Hatfield's eye. It had just occurred to the marshal that he had spoken out of turn. If the Lone Wolf had signed an alias to the hotel register tonight, that meant he was working on a case under cover, most likely. Inadvertently, Dawe had betrayed Hatfield's secret.

"Chisos?" Cragghorn shrugged. "An out-of-work saddle bum who braced me for a job this morning. I told him to handle the key rack and desk, swamp out the rooms, make beds, janitor and night porter, for five bucks a week and his lodging and grub."

Dawe turned back to the Ranger. "That yarn satisfy you, Mr. uh—Harkness?"

The Lone Wolf grinned drily. "As long as the cat's out of the bag, Marshal, might as well call me Hatfield . . . Cragghorn's story jibes, I guess. Chisos gained entry to my room tonight by posing as a hotel porter, fetching me towels. Only under the towels—" Hatfield glanced down at the derringer he was still holding, a ribbon of smoke seeping from its short barrel—"was this stinger."

Dawe tucked his shotgun under his arm and stalked forward to peer down at the dead half-beed. Cragghorn, his face pasty, remained rooted to his tracks. A mumble of voices out in the hall told that a small crowd was collecting outside.

"Vamose, Cragghorn," Hatfield said, setting Chisos' pistol on the marble wash stand. "Herd the public down to the lobby. I want words with the marshal."

CRAGGHORN grunted something under his breath, said in a whining voice, "I had nothin' to do with this killing, Ted. If him an' Jim Hatfield had a private feud, just remember I had no way of knowing this man was a Ranger. The proof is in my book downstairs."

After Cragghorn had stepped outside to face the throng of curious visitors in the corridor, Marshal Dawe tossed his shotgun on the bed and reached out a big hand to grip Hatfield's. Dawe, a man in his middle fifties, was sandy-haired and sloppy of dress. But Hatfield knew that Dawe was a lawman he could trust.

Dawe spoke first: "Ought to cut off my tongue, Jim. Blabbing out that you're a Ranger thataway. I was so damn startled to recognize you, standing here over a dead man—"

Hatfield shrugged. "Water over the dam . . . Say, Ted, when you got your first look at Chisos lyin' there, you gave me the impression you know more about him than Cragghorn pretended to know."

Dawe, hunkering down beside the corpse, looked up with an expression of astonishment. "You mean you don't know who he is?"

Hatfield blinked. "Should I? The name isn't familiar. The face—could be any one of a thousand *mestizos*. Who is he?"

Dawe came laboriously to his feet. "Why, Chisos is packing a thousand-dollar bounty on his scalp. Train robbery and murder. He got across the Border and got himself a job as a houseman in a gambling casino down at Villa Segovia, Chihuahua."

Hatfield grabbed Dawe's arm. "Is this casino run by a Texan named Fancy Dan Kelso, by any chance?"

Dawe nodded. "The same. Runs the Casino del Coronado, the most unusal gambling hall in Old Mexico, I reckon."

Hatfield felt a cold thrill wash through him. Unrelated events were falling into a pattern now. McDowell was assigning him to a case down in Spanish Crossing—a case which might possibly link Fancy Dan Kelso with international gun-running. And a gunman in Kelso's employ had risked his own hide to ride fifty miles into Texas for the purpose of waylaying Hatfield.

"It's quite a joint, Fancy Dan's casino," Dawe was saying. "He restored the ruins of an old Spanish chapel the padres built back in the Sixteen Hundreds, overlooking the Rio Grande. Coronado and his *conquistadores* are supposed to have camped there. If you ever get down thataway you ought to look over Kelso's layout. It's fantastic."

"Marshal," Hatfield said slowly, "I *am* headed to Spanish Crossing—on a secret assignment. I'd appreciate anything you could tell me about this Chisos. I'm positive he was sent up here to 'gulch me."

Dawe shrugged. "About all I know about Chisos is what the reward dodgers say about him, Hatfield. Been on the dodge three years. Wanted for murdering a dance hall girl in Eagle Pass. Thousand bucks reward posted on his scalp, dead or alive. Reckon that bounty's your'n, Jim."

"No, thanks. Rangers don't kill for pay . . . You haven't seen Chisos around, apparently?"

"Hell, no! How he braced Cragghorn for a porter's job without me seeing him show up is beyond me. I got Chisos' reward poster, with his picture, tacked right over my desk."

Hatfield said, "What is Cragghorn's rep around here?"

"He's a big wheel. Runs a freighting business between here and the various settlements in the back country. Owns the hotel, operates it for something to keep him busy. No criminal record."

Hatfield stared down thoughtfully at

the man he had been forced to kill. It was a shooting he keenly regretted, for he knew beyond doubt that this half-breed was linked with the international gun-running ring that was keeping the political war going in Old Mexico. Now Chisos' lips were sealed for eternity.

"Ted," the Lone Wolf said finally, "I'm operating under very secret orders, but I can tell you this much. I'm going to work on a case down at Spanish Crossing. But apparently the word has leaked out that I'm on my way—because that's why Juan Chisos was here to kill me tonight."

TED DAWE shook his head somberly. "If your identity has leaked out, then you might as well wire your head office to put another Ranger on the job, Hatfield. You're not bullet proof. And if Chisos was laying for you, fifty miles north of the Crossing, what chance would you have of riding down that trail tomorrow and getting there alive?"

The Lone Wolf took a turn around the room. In the back of his mind he was inclined to agree with Dawe. The way things looked, it might be sheer suicide to carry on with this case. But Hatfield had never yet dropped out of an assignment handed him and he did not intend to crawfish now—especially where international problems were concerned, with American outlaws fanning the fires of a rebellion that could destroy the Mexican government.

"Look," he said suddenly. "What disposition would you ordinarily make of this hombre's remains?"

Dawe looked embarrassed. "Seeing as how he's worth gold on receipt of proof of death, why, I'd have his remains photographed and then I'd hire a couple of barflies to plant him in boot hill."

"Who's the coroner here in Junction?"

"I am," Dawe said. "Deputy coroner, that is. Chief coroner's up at the county seat, of course. Marfa."

"Who's your local undertaker?"

"Feller name of Ben Seales. Runs a feed store and funeral parlor."

"Is Seales dependable?"

The marshal nodded. "I'll vouch for him a thousand per cent."

Hatfield's eyes flashed with growing excitement. "*Bueno.* When does the next Wells Fargo stage pull out for Spanish Crossing?"

"Midnight. Pulls in from Marfa at eleven fifteen, changes teams, leaves at twelve sharp. Wells Fargo prefers night runs to the Rio Grande, cooler this time of year, easier on passengers and teams." Dawe's head cocked to one side. "You got a gleam in your eye, son. What are you scheming? Why all o' these questions?"

Jim Hatfield walked over to the dead man, stopped, and unpried Chisos' talon-like fingers from the butts of the Colt .45s.

"I'm in this case too deep to back out now," he said mysteriously. "It'd be foolhardy to show up in Spanish Crossing too openly. But I think this dead breed will be my safe ticket to the Border."

Dragging his gun harness out from under the bed, Hatfield strapped on the twin belts and holstered his Peacemakers.

"As deputy coroner," he said, "are you pretty well known down in Spanish Crossing?"

"Ain't been down thataway in ten, twelve years."

"Good. So much the better. As deputy coroner, you're going to ship Chisos' remains down to his last known address—express collect to Fancy Dan Kelso's gambling palace in Villa Segovia. And as your assistant, I'm going to accompany the body."

Ted Dawe looked flabbergasted. "Why go to so much bother over the carcass of a half-breed who tried to kill you? Kelso won't care where one of his gunslingers is planted."

The Lone Wolf took another turn around the room, whipping his plan into shape.

"I can't show up in Spanish Crossing on my big sorrel—lone riders would be too conspicuous. But as a passenger on tonight's stage-coach, packing your written authorization to escort a corpse back to its home address, nobody's going to give

me a second look."

Dawe rubbed his jaw dubiously. "It's your hide you're risking. If you're on Fancy Dan Kelso's trail, you're licked before you start, seein' as how your Ranger badge is just a worthless hunk o' tin on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. And Kelso will never set foot on Texas soil, you can bet your last blue chip on that."

Hatfield's plans were made now. He said briskly, "Have your undertaker friend put Chisos in a coffin and see that he's aboard the stage when it pulls out tonight. I'll plant the idea here in Junction that I'm heading back north, but you'll arrange for me to hop that stage outside of town. Okay?"

"I'll do anything I can," said the lawman. You know that, Jim." "Seales can even furnish you with an undertaker's frock coat—"

TEN minutes later, Jim Hatfield trailed his spurs down the lobby stairs to find corpulent Baldy Cragghorn presiding over what appeared to be a mass meeting of Junction's permanent porch loafers. The sudden hush that descended at the moment of Hatfield's appearance told him that his fight with Juan Chisos was common knowledge now.

Scores of eyes followed the tall, ruggedly handsome stranger as he crossed the lobby and seated himself at a writing desk. Getting an envelope and paper from a drawer, Hatfield wrote and addressed a message to "Captain William MacDowell, Texas Ranger Headquarters, Frontier Battalion, Austin, Texas". It read:

MY IDENTITY NOW KNOWN, USELESS TO ATTEMP CARRYING OUT ASSIGNMENT, AM RETURNING TO FORT STOCKON. DETAILS FOLLOW BY LETTER.
HATFIELD

He put the message in the addressed envelope and sealed it. Shouldering his saddle-bags then, he headed over to the reception desk where Cragghorn was standing. The bald-headed hotel man had the tame bird perched on his key-rack now. It greeted him raucously: "Howdy, sport. Flush beats a full house."

Nervous titters swept the crowd grouped under the lobby lamps. Hatfield dropped the envelope on the counter in front of Cragghorn, along with a five-dollar bill and the key to Room 8.

"I'd appreciate you sending a telegram for me," he said to Cragghorn. "It'll cost a buck. Keep the change for your trouble. I'd send it myself, but I haven't got time."

Cragghorn's big hand paused in its ceaseless stroking of the magpie's plumage. "You checking out already, Mr. Harkness?"

Hatfield grinned. "You saw what happened upstairs. For all I know that porter of yours might have *compañeros* floating around. I'm pulling stakes—fast."

Cragghorn picked up the envelope addressed to Ranger Captain McDowell, swallowed hard, then looked up to meet the flat strike of Hatfield's gaze.

"Sure—sure, Harkness. I'll get this telegram sent out for you. "I—I'm sorry about that maverick porter trying to waylay you in your room."

Hatfield was already heading toward the street door. To the gawking spectators he said, "Marshal Dawe needs a couple of men to help tote some cold meat over to the morgue. Easy way to pick up a couple of bucks."

Leaving the hotel, Hatfield headed straight for the stable where he had left Goldy. He found the hostler on duty.

"Saddle up my sorrel," he ordered. "I won't be stopping overnight in Junction after all. I'm returning to Fort Stockton."

Wordlessly, the stable tender picked up his lantern and headed away. Hatfield, waiting in the open doorway of the stable, kept his eye on Junction's Main Street. A railroad switch engine, shutting cattle cars onto a siding, sent the long funneling beam of its headlight down the length of the street, to the Frontier Hotel and beyond.

The street was empty. No one had attempted to follow him away from the hotel.

Before the hostler got back with his saddle horse, the Lone Wolf saw Juan Chisos' body, loaded on a pallet, being toted out of Cragghorn's hotel, headed for Seale's funeral parlor.

When the hostler brought up Goldy, saddled and bridled, it was obvious that the man had something on his mind.

"Something maybe you ought to know, stranger," the swamper said. "While I was curryin' down your stallion this evening, I had a visitor. Asked a lot of questions about who rode this bronc."

Hatfield swung into stirrups and picked up the reins. "So?" he answered noncommittally, unable to guess which side of the fence this stable man might be on. "Who was this curious hombre?"

"You wouldn't know him. A Mex from south of the Border. Cussed myself for not having a gun handy, because I know he's packing a reward on his topknot, here in Texas. His picture's posted over at the marshal's office."

THE Lone Wolf said carefully, "Why tell me all this?"

"Well, I thought I ought to warn any man that a gunhawk was showing an interest in who a feller is, where he came from."

"And what did you tell him?"

The hostler laughed. "What *could* I tell him? I don't ask the pedigrees of my customers. I don't even know your name. But if I was you, I'd watch my back track tonight, stranger."

Hatfield wheeled Goldy around, facing the north trail.

"What's your name?" he asked the hostler.

"Larson, Einar Larson. I own this stable."

"Well, Larson," Hatfield said, "I'm obliged for what you just told me. It so happens Juan Chisos—the breed who was curious about me—is lying on a stone slab over at Seales' morgue right now. Go tell Marshal Dawe that Jim Hatfield said any reward payable on Chisos' scalp is all yours, Larson."

Leaving Einar Larson with his jaw hanging open in astonishment, the Lone Wolf spurred away into the night.

Keeping Goldy at a reaching gallop until he topped the ridge north of town, he knew the hoofbeats had reached every ear in town; there could be no doubt that he was headed in the opposite direction from the Rio Grande. But would hostile ears accept that ruse?

A mile north of Junction Hatfield turned off the trail and rode due west along the dry bed of a wash, on the first leg of a half-circle which would skirt Junction, cross the railroad tracks, and bring him up due south of the settlement, on the Spanish Crossing road.

He was pretty sure that by now Cragghorn had had his look at the fake telegram Hatfield had scribbled down. At least twenty of Junction's citizens had heard him declare that he was hightailing it back where he came from. He was inclined to trust the hostler, but regardless, Einar Larson knew he was heading for Fort Stockton, in the opposite direction from Spanish Crossing.

A two-mile ride westward and Hatfield swung his stallion south on the second leg of his journey to bypass the railroad town. Reaching the tracks, he found his passage blocked by what seemed an endlessly long freight, but a trestle was handy and he rode under it, keeping steadily southward until he was a good two miles away from Junction. There he turned east, and kept Goldy at a jog trot until he reached the ribbon of ruts marking the stage and freight road to Spanish Crossing.

He had smoked two cigarettes, hunkered down behind a bosque of screw-bean mesquites off the road, when a lone horseman materialized, coming from the direction of town. It was Marshal Dawe.

Answering Hatfield's hail from the brush, the lawman reined over.

"Everything's going fine," Dawe reported. "Coffin with Chisos' body in it is lashed onto the south-bound stage. Pop Cornforth's driving—says he knows you well, Jim. Seales loaned us a long black swaller tail coat, black hat, string tie and

white shirt, so's you'll look like a coroner's assistant when you show up in Spanish Crossing tomorrow."

Hatfield grinned. His orders had been carried out to the letter.

"Far as I know," Dave added, "nobody tried trailing you out of town tonight. I think Chisos was operating solo."

"*Muy bien,* Marshal," Hatfield said, turning Goldy's reins over to Dawe. "You'll be careful to keep my sorrel out of sight until I get back, now? Junction's supposed to think he's on his way back to Fort Stockton tonight."

Dawe nodded reassuringly. "I'll keep Goldy locked up in my private barn, not in the county stable at the jailhouse. . . . How long you figger to be down at the Border?"

"*Quien sabe?* Depends on how tough this assignment turns out to be. Right now, my main thought is getting to Spanish Crossing without being bushwhacked. As a stage-coach passenger, I think I'll make it. As a known Ranger on horseback, I would never have made it."

Out of the gloom came a swelling rumble of wheels and hooves, and the twin yellow dots marking the running lamps of a southbound Wells Fargo stage-coach came in sight around the shoulder of a knob.

"That's your stage now, Jim," Dawe said. "Cornforth's not carrying any passengers tonight, and Cornforth's to be trusted."

"I know—Pop and I have been friends a long time," the Ranger said, shaking hands with Dawe. "*Gracias* for everything, amigo."

CHAPTER IV

At the Border

THE night-long stage-coach journey was over. Old Pop Cornforth, with Jim Hatfield sharing the driver's seat with him, grunted, "There's Spanish Crossin', Jim," just as they reached the north rim of the Rio Grande's canyon and saw the dawning sun lift above the mountainous horizon downriver.

Hatfield was glad the journey was finished. He felt somewhat ridiculous in the black clawhammer coat, hat, white shirt and string tie with which the Junction undertaker, Seales, had supplied him as a further disguise against possible bushwhackers along the route. The plain pine box, painted black, in which reposed the corpse of Juan Chisos, rode the cleated roof of the stage-coach.

As Cornforth let his six-horse team take a breather—the third change of teams this side of Junction—Hatfield had his first look at the Border towns facing each other across a river bridge.

Spanish Crossing, so named because the *conquistadores* of 1540 had forded the river at this point during their search for the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola, consisted of two parallel streets crowded between the foot of the cliffs and the river bank. The Texas bank of the Rio Grande, for as far as Hatfield could see in either direction, was guarded by a ten-foot steel-mesh fence topped by overhanging barricades of barbed wire.

That fence was, in effect, the boundary between the United States and Mexico, and its presence in this isolated community pointed up what Hatfield had always heard—that every possible precaution had been taken to prevent smuggling at this Point of Entry.

The actual international boundary was the center of the main river channel, but this, unlike the wire fence, was a line that changed from season to season as sand bars built up or eroded away.

"Yonder's your immigration station an' Port o' Entry," commented Pop Cornforth, pointing with his silver-ferruled whip. "Yankee customs house at this end of the bridge, Mexican on the other end. You can bet your bottom dollar no wetbacks git acrost the river at Spanish Crossing."

Cornforth pawed in a tool box under the seat and drew out a pair of battered army field-glasses. Handing them to his

black-coated passenger, he said, "Have a look at the Mexican town acrost the river. That buildin' on the bluff that looks like a church, that's Fancy Dan Kelso's casino. Nothin' else like it anywhere in Chihuahua. The *pelados* come from all over to play monte and buck the roulette wheel and such like."

Hatfield focused the glasses on the Mexican town across the river. In the pink glow of sunrise, the whitewashed adobe walls and red tiled roofs, which he knew were probably squalid at close range, had a fairy-tale aspect, picturesque and romantic.

Dominating the town from the edge of a bluff several hundred feet above the river was a mission building which, with its curved facade, spiral columns and wall niches, reminded Hatfield of the Alamo up in San Antonio.

As a matter of fact, this isolated mission was one of a chain of chapels which the Franciscans had built in the New World back in the late Sixteen Hundreds, of which the famous Alamo was one. But, although time and vandalism had reduced this church to a mere shell of its original beauty, it had been further profaned by a gaudy sign which Hatfield could read even with the naked eye from the Texas side of the river:

CASINO DEL CORONADO.

"So that's Fancy Dan's establishment," Jim Hatfield murmured. "As long as I've rambled around Texas, Pop, and as long as I've heard of Fancy Dan's del Coronado, this is the first time I ever laid eyes on it."

Old Cornforth popped his whip and got the red-and-yellow Concord rolling down the grade overlooking Spanish Crossing.

"There's them as say it's bad luck to turn a Franciscan mission into a gamblin' den," the jehu said, "but when Dan Kelso hopped acrost the border to escape Yankee law, and moved into them ruins, peons

A TALL TEXAS TALE

BRIGHT LIGHTS

A GROUP of Texans were talking about the big lightning bugs they had seen around and about. One said, "I used to put them bugs to work. Why, one time I had a dog that couldn't see at night and this here dog had a pet frog that followed him around. So I fed the frog lightning bugs till he glowed like a neon sign and all the dog had to do was pick him up by the hind leg and carry him around like a lantern."

"Shucks, that ain't nothing," replied another. "I cross lightning bugs with my bees, and now the bees work two shifts around the clock. But my woman goes and feeds these lightning bugs to our chickens and the eggs now have a sixty watt glow. Trouble is, it lights up the hen house till the roosters don't know dawn from midnight, and there wasn't nobody getting much sleep with them crowing around the clock—till I got the whole flock of 'em fitted with dark glasses."

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

were usin' the mission chapel as a hay-barn. And the *campo santo,* what the Mexicans call their cemetery, it had all been dug up with mine shafts."

HATFIELD echoed, "Mining? Modern day stuff, you mean, or back in the days of the Franciscan padres?"

"Olden times," Cornforth grunted. "Copper an' silver deposits over there in them hills, perty well worked out before the gringos took Texas away from Mexico, of course. In fact, it was an Indian massacree that wiped out the mission over yonder and left it in ruins. Now, the whole place is just a hang-out for owl-hooters."

A twenty-minute jouncing run brought the thoroughbraced coach to the level of River Street, the final hundred yards of the road serving as the approach to the international bridge.

"Seein' as how your freight is consigned acrost the river," Cornforth drawled, referring to Chisos' coffin, "I might as well deliver you right to the Border gates. You can't even ship a dead man into Mexico without the coffin being searched."

Hatfield grinned bleakly. "Sure. Smugglers used to use that trick—false bottomed coffins, the dead man's pockets full of dope or counterfeit money. You can't blame Customs for being cautious."

Except for a few early-morning breakfast fires sending their smokes into the crystal-clear air of the river canyon, Hatfield had seen no signs of human activity on either side of the river.

Now, as the stage-coach approached the Customs House on the Texas side of the bridge, he saw a uniformed officer emerge and run the Stars and Stripes up a flagstaff.

Cornforth pulled his dusty stage to a halt alongside a shed carrying signs in both English and Spanish, BAGGAGE EXAMINED HERE. The Port of Entry here at Spanish Crossing was identical, on a smaller scale, to ports Hatfield had seen at El Paso, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Laredo and Brownsville.

"Got some freight to declare, Mike!" Cornforth called down to the Customs officer. "Cold meat in a pine box. Danny Kelso's Number One gunslammer has slammed his last gun."

The Customs man climbed to the hurricane deck and had his look at the coroner's shipping tag on the coffin. Before he could comment, Cornforth said, "Mike, this here is a deppity coroner from Junction. Mike Conway, customs inspector, this is—"

"Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield." Conway grinned, shaking hands with Hatfield. "We've known each other for years, Pop." The grin faded from Conway's lips. "Hatfield, I'm sorry to see you. Especially so, if you had anything to do with killing one of Fancy Dan Kelso's men. Why did you come to Spanish Crossing?"

"Orders, Mike."

"I wired McDowell that your coming was already well known here. Old Gabe Weaver has blabbed it all over town. The man's a total lunatic, Jim. Worst of all, he spilled the reason why you're coming—to investigate Gabe's hunch that the rebel gun running is being done at this Port of Entry. Which is absurd."

Conway's news came as a grim shock to Hatfield, although it matched what Juan Chisos had said about Gabe Weaver up in Junction last night. Chisos hadn't mentioned the gun-running angle.

"I didn't realize it was that bad—I mean, that the Triple R business had been gabbed around," Hatfield said. "When did you wire my headquarters to warn me?"

"This morning, a little after midnight." Conway added jealously, "Even if it were true—that the gun-running syndicate is operating at this point on the Border—our Patrol would take care of apprehending the smugglers. No offense, Jim, but guarding the Texas part of the Border is a federal, not a Ranger job."

Hatfield let Conway's jibe pass. He was too travel-weary, for one thing, to get into an argument about whether the Border Patrol or the Texas Rangers had jurisdiction in the matter of smuggling arms out of Texas. What was of more immediate concern to him was Conway's report

about old Captain Weaver's mental condition.

"Weaver isn't competent, then?" Hatfield inquired. "I was called down here on a wild goose chase?"

CONWAY'S curling lip was eloquent of his low opinion of the old-time Ranger hero.

"If any gun-running was taking place along the Rio Grande," Conway said, "the one place I'm positive it *wouldn't* be done is here at the Spanish Crossing Port of Entry."

"But," Hatfield protested, "your own Border Patrol authorities admit the Rebel Rifle Runners are operating between Texas and Mexico, not further west along the Border."

Conway colored. He gestured up and down the river canyon.

"Look at that fence—patrolled around the clock by men and dogs. Another fence on the Chihuahua side of the Rio, with *rurales,* and even federal troops on guard duty. Look at my gate here at the bridge—triple-locked from sunset to sunrise, and guarded night and day. Why, Hatfield, you couldn't smuggle a dried-up tortilla across the Border without us catching you."

Disappointment stabbed Hatfield deep. It had been years since he had seen old Gabriel Weaver, but it was saddening to know that the years had destroyed the old man's mind. All unknowingly, Weaver's garrulous tongue had nearly cost Hatfield his life, up in Junction last night.

"As an example," Conway was saying, "this coffin. I'll have to open it now, search the corpse, and seal the box before it can cross this bridge. And on the Mexican side the process would be just as thorough for anything coming into Texas." Conway smiled blandly. "No, my friend Hatfield. If you've come here hoping to trace your rebel gun-running to Spanish Crossing, you have had your effort for nothing."

Hatfield made no immediate comment. A certain amount of jealousy existed for the Texas Rangers in the minds of petty Border officials such as this Mike Conway; Hatfield had run into such an attitude before, in cases involving Border smuggling. And, if Captain Gabe Weaver's findings turned out to be imaginary, Conway's viewpoint might well be confirmed.

"Suppose we unload this coffin for your inspection," Hatfield suggested finally, "and I'll have the local undertaker get in touch with Kelso so he can send someone over the bridge to—"

"No dice," Conway interrupted curtly. "Today happens to be Sunday. The Border gates won't open until one o'clock. In another hour it'll be a hundred in the shade. I can't accept a dead body for even temporary storage, Hatfield."

Annoyance carved a notch between Hatfield's brows. Juan Chisos' mortal remains had served their purpose, by accounting for his arrival in town. Now it would seem he had an embarrassing responsibility on his hands—the disposal of a gunhawk's remains.

"I will do this, however," Conway went on. "I will inspect the contents of this coffin and affix our seals on it. Then, providing the seals are intact when you bring the coffin back to the gates at one this afternoon, we will have avoided a rather unpleasant chore."

Hatfield glanced at Cornforth. "If our stage driver doesn't mind the delay—"

Cornforth shrugged. "Not having any passengers this run, it don't matter when I turn up at the stage barn. Go ahead and do your inspectin', Mike. Better now than in the heat o' the day."

Cornforth and Hatfield left the stage and got themselves a refreshing drink from the moist *ollas* hanging under the Customs shed. Hatfield, while nettled by Conway's officious atttitude, had to respect the man for his strict adherence to regulations. Most Border guards, knowing Hatfield was a Ranger, would have sealed the coffin without inspecting its contents.

"Where could I find a Miss Linda Bartlett?" Hatfield asked.

"Gabe's grand-datter? She runs a bakery shop on B Street, right acrost from the

Wells Fargo terminal."

"And Gabe Weaver lives there?"

"This time of day, especially on a Sunday, you'll find old Gabe up at the boot hill at the edge of town yonder. Spends half of his time grievin' at his son's grave, Weaver does. Pitiful. He's touched in the head anyway. He's lucky he's got Miss Linda to watch after him."

HATFIELD felt a stab of remorse at the thought of finding his old friend and Ranger mentor reduced in mental powers to little above the animal level. Gabriel Weaver had been a top-notch law officer in his day, but he had been an old man even when Hatfield had first known him.

His reverie was broken by Conway coming over from the stage to report, "Coffin's inspected and sealed, Hatfield. You won't lose any time on inspection when you show up this afternoon. I'll be on duty all day and I'll pass you through without red tape."

As he and Cornforth climbed back aboard the stage-coach, Hatfield demanded suddenly, "What am I supposed to do with Chisos between now and this afternoon? Wells Fargo won't store it for me any more than you would, Mike."

Conway answered. "Pop, call in the undertaker, Dave Overbaw. He's got that ice storage cave behind Cragghorn's warehouse where he stores bodies."

Cornforth swung his team around on the bridge ramp and swung west on River Street.

With the sun barely a half-hour above the horizon, there was still no sign of life on the Texas side of the river. But from Villa Segovia, Hatfield could hear worshipers chanting the responses of a mass in a church. It seemed incongrous, the devout at worship in a town that was supposed to be a sink-hole of outlawry.

"Now in case you don't find Gabe Weaver up at the cemetery communin' with his son's departed speerit," Pop Cornforth said, "remember what I told you, him livin' upstairs over Linda's Bakery."

Hatfield said, "I'd just as soon see Miss Bartlett first anyway. She—"

Hatfield's words were blanked out by the shattering report of a rifle shot, coming from somewhere close at hand. The Lone Wolf felt the undertaker's black felt hat jerked from his head by a slug which could not have missed his skull by more than an inch.

"Keep 'em rollin', Pop!" Hatfield yelled. "It's my ambush trap!"

Moving purely by reflex, Hatfield vaulted back to the roof of the stage, yanking a sixgun from holster as he spotted the tell-tale smudge of gunsmoke drifting from an alley mouth between two brick buildings across the street. The gunhawk, whoever he was, was crouched in the shadows of that alley slot.

Pop Cornforth stood up and cracked his whip, yelling like a Comanche. Veteran of many an ambuscade in his forty-year career as a frontier drover, the doughty old Wells Fargo jehu lashed his team into a run as Hatfield hurled himself behind Chisos' coffin and propped himself up for a quick peek in the direction of the alley.

He had a glimpse of a man's spare shape rounding the corner of the brick warehouse, sunlight glinting on a Winchester barrel as the ambusher, realizing he had missed his first try, levered a second cartridge into the breech.

It was an appearance Hatfield had been counting on, and he was ready. Thrusting his arm across the coffin lid, for the briefest of instants Hatfield notched his gun sights on the crouched figure at the alley mouth and squeezed off his shot.

Considering the range and the jouncing stage, it was a fantastically lucky shot. As wind whipped gunsmoke away from his eyes, the crouched Ranger atop the stage saw the rifle slip from the ambusher's grasp, saw the man lurch back to strike the brick corner of the warehouse, hard hit, dying on his feet.

"Keep going, Pop!" Hatfield yelled, and lowered himself over the leather-and-canvas baggage boot at the rear of the speeding Concord. Letting go, he landed with an arcobat's agility on the rutted

street, a vague shadow behind the boiling yellow dust stirred up by the coach wheels.

Sixgun palmed, Jim Hatfield crouched low and sprinted out of that covering dust cloud. He saw his would-be ambusher leaning away from the warehouse wall, both hands clawing at his chest, and then, toppling like a hewn tree, measure his length on the spur-scuffed plank sidewalk.

HATFIELD raced at a quartering angle across the street, sixgun poised for treachery. But the target of his lucky shot was dead, lying half across the still-fuming Winchester.

Jumping the high wooden curb onto the boardwalk, Hatfield stared down at the dead man, his head turned toward Hatfield, cheek pressed against the splintered, sun-warped planks.

There was something vaguely familiar about the man's brushpopper jumper, bib overalls and manure-encrusted boots. Somewhere, and recently, Hatfield had seen that straw-yellow shock of hair, the blocky Scandinavian face with its cottony brows, prominent cheek-bones and square-moulded jaw.

It was the stable odor clinging to this corpse that gave Hatfield his final tip-off.

"Einar Larson!"

There was disbelief in Hatfield's voice as he whispered the name of the friendly hostler up at the livery barn in Junction. Who only last night had warned him of danger.

CHAPTER V

Boot Hill Rendezvous

ALTHOUGH the sun was less than an hour high and Sunday was a traditional siesta day everywhere along the Mexican border, the sound of gunfire was causing doors to open all up and down the length of the street facing the river.

Glancing around, Hatfield caught sight of Pop Cornforth tooling his Wells Fargo stage out of sight down an intersecting street. Customs Inspector Conway had run out of his guardhouse at the approaches to the International Bridge to investigate the brief exchange of shots.

Hatfield thrust back the tails of the uncomfortable black swallowtail coat he was wearing and holstered his gun. His mind was confused He could understand someone here in Spanish Crossing taking a pot shot at him, and he had been braced for possible attack during every mile of the night journey from Junction.

One thing he could not understand was how Einar Larson, the hostler who had warned him about Chisos last night, had reached Spanish Crossing ahead of the stage.

And then he guessed the answer. Larson must have trailed him away from the barn last night to make sure he was heading for Fort Stockton as Hatfield had claimed. When he had lost the trail, the stableman had realized that the Lone Wolf's ruse had been calculated to throw trailers off the scent. Then Larson could have struck out directly for Spanish Crossing and could have been ahead of the stage-coach Cornforth was driving all night. Or Larson could have been trailing them. He could have arrived in Spanish Crossing while Hatfield was wasting time over at the International Gate while Conway was inspecting and sealing Chisos' coffin.

The strike of boots on the board walk behind him alerted Hatfield to possible danger. Here in Spanish Crossing, he had no way of knowing what gun was friendly, what gun was the weapon that might blast him to boot hill.

Anyway, he thought grimly, it all added up to the fact that he was on a hot trail. No matter how loco Gabe Weaver might turn out to be, he'd stirred up something in Spanish Crossing. Texas Rangers were not welcome, that was for sure.

Hatfield was pleased at sight of a tin star glinting on the coat lapel of one of several men who were striding up the street in his direction—the night marshal,

most likely, or a deputy sheriff. There would be a lot of explaining to do, standing here over a dead man. The best he could hope to do was pose as an assistant coroner from Junction—he'd have Pop Cornforth to back him up on that—and keep his true identity out of the picture.

Standing there waiting for the approching lawman to arrive, Hatfield was startled to see the door of the brick warehouse open and a familiar beefy-shaped figure in a candy-striped shirt step out.

Perched on the man's shoulder was a black-and-white magpie, shaggy from moulting. The bird, catching sight of Hatfield, squawked, "Howdy, sport! Flush beats a full house!"

Hatfield whipped back the black folds of his undertaker's coat, hand clamping around gunstock, as the pudgy man finished locking the warehouse door and turned to meet the Ranger eye to eye.

"Baldy Cragghorn," Hatfield grated incredulously, "you hombres from Junction really get around."

The hotel owner removed a malodorous cheroot from his flabby lips and said quietly, "A business trip brought Larson and me down from Junction last night."

"I know," Hatfield said drily. "Larson made a good try, attending to that business. He perforated a good black hat. Not bad shooting, at a moving target."

CRAGGHORN said blandly, studying the fuming tip of his cheroot, "I have no idea what this is all about. I heard two shots—I came out to investigate. I . . . Oh, howdy, Marshal Gerlock."

Hatfield glanced around. The man wearing the tin star had arrived. He was young, clean-cut, his cheeks showing the taut strain which bespoke the fact that he had been on all-night duty last night.

Gerlock was joined by three or four nondescripts. His glance shuttled from the dead stable owner to Hatfield and, briefly, to the shirt-sleeved figure of Cragghorn on the steps.

The magpie remarked caustically, "Tinhorn sport, tinhorn sport."

Without warning, Gerlock snapped a Remington .44 from the holster slung at his hip. Tipping the muzzle skyward, the Spanish Crossing lawman bit out:

"All right, who's going to do the talking? Who's the dead man?"

Hatfield said, "Ask Señor Cragghorn, Marshal. He and the dead man trailed me down from Junction last night."

Marshal Gerlock's gun seemed to be bearing on Hatfield, but his next words were directed to the grinning hotel keeper:

"What's the story, Cragghorn?"

Cragghorn reached up to stroke the feathers of the magpie on his shoulder.

"The story, Marshal? Why, it's a bit confused, I'm afraid. The dead man is a Mr. Einar Larson, who runs a livery barn up in Junction. I had a business trip to make to Spanish Crossing, and when I went to get my horse at Larson's stable he said he'd ride along with me. Said he had some saddle stock to buy down here."

Marshal Gerlock's brittle gaze swung back to Hatfield.

"Pop Cornforth reports that you're a deputy coroner from Junction," the marshal said in a friendlier tone, "and that this Larson hombre, or somebody hidin' out in this alley, tried to pick you off the stage as it went past. Any idea why?"

It was beginning to get uncomfortably warm in the black fustian coat. Hatfield shrugged out of it, dropping the garment across Larson's head to keep the flies off the body. He felt better when he had clawed the string tie from around his neck and loosened the collar of the white shirt.

"Larson was trying to bushwhack me," he answered the lawman's question candidly, "because he knew I wasn't any more a deputy coroner than he was."

Gerlock's brows arched. "Who are you, then? Cornforth wouldn't have any call to lie to me."

Before Hatfield could explain that the stage driver was trying to protect his anonymity, Baldy Cragghorn spoke up: "The gentleman ain't what he seems, Marshal. He's a Texas Ranger, name of Hatfield. The Number One Ranger, I guess, in all Texas."

Marshal Gerlock sucked in a breath. The men behind him—the crowd had tripled in size by now, the new arrivals being swampers from the various deadfalls up and down the street—began whispering among themselves, peering furtively at Hatfield.

"Is that true?" Gerlock said finally.

"I'm Hatfield," the Lone Wolf admitted. "I shot Larson in self-defense, as Pop Cornforth can testify. Mike Conway down at the Customs House can identify me also, Marshal."

Marcus Gerlock shoved his sixgun into holster. Before he could speak, Hatfield turned to Cragghorn and said carefully:

"You had to move pretty fast to beat me down here last night, Cragghorn. I'm not sure, but I think maybe I've got enough on you to put you under arrest, mister."

Cragghorn went on stroking the magpie's plumage.

"Arrest me? What for, Ranger?"

"Your porter tried to bushwhack me in your hotel last night, up in Junction. You trailed me down here with Larson—"

Baldy Cragghorn smiled unconcernedly. "Your imagination is workin' overtime, Ranger. Take a look at the sign on this warehouse wall, will you?"

SCOWLING, Hatfield glanced overhead. In letters three feet high was the legend, "CRAGGHORN & KELSO FREIGHT LINES, INC."

"I run a freightin' business out of Junction," Cragghorn explained patiently. "At my age, and in this climate, I can't travel by the heat of day, so when I need to visit my Spanish Crossing office, I ride by night. Does that explain why I'm here?"

Hatfield ignored the question. An answer was no longer important to him. Something about Cragghorn's warehouse sign had set his pulses racing. He said sharply, "Cragghorn and Kelso—is your partner Fancy Dan Kelso?"

Cragghorn smiled. "He was, a few years back. Unfortunately, Danny Kelso got himself embroiled with the law and the partnership had to be dissolved. Kelso had to leave the U.S.A.—for keeps."

Hatfield said quickly, "Kelso runs the gambling casino across the river? He's the same Kelso?"

Cragghorn touched a fresh match to his cheroot and spoke through the smoke-puffs: "The same Kelso. But, like I say, he's wanted by the authorities on this side of the river. So—he is no longer my business partner."

The Lone Wolf's brain was spinning with conjecture. Captain McDowell's letter had said the only hint Gabe Weaver would drop about the gun-running gang was that Fancy Dan Kelso was implicated. Cased rifles were heavy merchandise; they could be transported only in freight wagons such as Cragghorn had on the roads.

Jim Hatfield turned to Marshal Gerlock. "I'd like a private pow-wow with you as soon as possible, Marshal," he said.

Gerlock nodded. He turned to the growing crowd on the board walk, gestured to two saloon swampers, and said briskly, "Lug the dead man over to the morgue, Pete, Pancho, will you? Cragghorn, I'll want your deposition later as a witness to this—this gunplay."

Cragghorn lifted the cheroot from his teeth and said quietly, "Guess again, Marshal. I didn't witness this shooting. I was in my office in the back end of the warehouse when I heard shots, yes. I hurried to the street—in time to see Hatfield standing over Einar Larson's dead body. But I did not actually see how the shooting occurred."

Gerlock beckoned for Hatfield to follow him. Two swampers were lifting the corpse of the Junction stableman, by ankles and armpits. The magpie on Cragghorn's shoulder squawked a string of Spanish profanity, winding up with "Tinhorn sport, tinhorn sport!"

Hatfield fell in step with the Spanish Crossing marshal, glad to be away from the gathering crowd. When they were out of earshot, the Ranger said, "How about us having breakfast, Marshal? I've been traveling all night and—"

"I was going to suggest that," Marcus Gerlock said in a low voice. "You're here

in town to contact old Captain Weaver, aren't you?"

The Lone Wolf hesitated. McDowell had instructed him to contact Weaver upon arrival, but in "strictest secrecy." In a case involving the smuggling of millions of dollars' worth of illicit firearms, Hatfield had to be careful whom he trusted—even a man wearing a law badge.

"I savvy." Gerlock grinned. "You're under orders to play it cagey. Well, I can tell you this, Ranger. In a few weeks I am going to marry Linda Bartlett. Does that mean anything to you?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I'm afraid it doesn't, Marshal."

"Linda Bartlett is Captain Weaver's granddaughter. She runs a bakery shop here in town. Actually, she came here to take care of her grandfather. Gabe's ninety or thereabouts, you know, and a bit—shall we say, peculiar in the head these days?"

They turned a corner on the side street, where Hatfield had seen Pop Cornforth drive the stage-coach bearing Chisos' coffin. Spanish Crossing's side streets were necessarily dead-end and only a block long, leading from the waterfront to the base of the canyon walls.

TWO doors from the corner was a squat rock building with heavily barred windows and a sign reading:

CITY JAIL
MARSHAL'S OFFICE

Just beyond the calaboose was the Wells-Fargo station. Cornforth's stage-coach was just being backed into the barn by a pair of Mexican youths. Just before it vanished from sight, Hatfield noticed that the coffin had been lifted down from the deck.

"What I started to stay," Gerlock went on, "is that we'll have breakfast up at Linda's place—the bakeshop yonder. And Gabe Weaver will eat with us. He's expecting you, you know."

Hatfield grinned wryly. "So, I gather, is everyone else in town, thanks to the old man's advertising my arrival. And I'm supposed to be working incognito. That's why I was dolled up in the undertaker's duds."

Gerlock tarried long enough to lock up his office. Then, heading for Linda Bartlett's bakery shop, the young lawman said:

"I know you're working on the gun-running case, Hatfield—along with all the Border law agencies. I'd give ten years of my life to find out who's supplying Delgado's rebel army with Winchesters. But you won't find the answer here in Spanish Crossing. Gabe Weaver had you sent here, I know, but it was a mistake, a tragic waste of your time. No contraband traffic crosses the Border in the Spanish Crossing area. I'd stake my life on that."

They were angling across the street toward the bakery now. Hatfield said laconically, "You haven't been shot at twice in the past twenty-four hours. You haven't had to kill two men, Marshal. Cap'n Weaver might possibly have unearthed something."

Gerlock replied, "You sound like Linda. You'll be disappointed, Hatfield. Why, the old man can hardly remember his name—let alone solve a mystery that has baffled the best brains two governments have been able to put on the case."

"Gabe Weaver was a great man. Unless he's mentally sick, he could still be capable of greatness in spite of his age."

As they were approaching the bakery steps, the door of the shop opened and a strikingly beautiful young woman came out to meet them.

"My fiancée, Linda Bartlett," Gerlock said proudly. "Linda, you and Gramp got your wish. This is Jim Hatfield in person."

Linda Bartlett halted, lips parted and eyes widening with a kind of little-girl awe as the tall Ranger doffed his stetson. Then she flushed. "I hope you'll pardon me for staring," she said, reaching out to grasp the Ranger's hand. "But ever since I came to Spanish Crossing to take care of Gramp I've heard of nothing but Jim Hatfield, Jim Hatfield—"

"I'm honored to meet Cap'n Gabe's granddaughter, Linda."

Her eyes clouded suddenly. "I know Marcus has been telling you that Gramp is—is sort of crazy in the head. Maybe he is—a bit vague, sometimes. But I've got faith in Gramp and I—I believe he really must know something about this gun-running business that caused the murder of Gramp's son Matt!"

CHAPTER VI

Bullet from Nowhere

MARSHAL GERLOCK said testily, "Your faith in Gabe Weaver isn't based on common sense, Linda. It's because you love the old duffer, of course, and I don't blame you for that. But Ranger Hatfield has been brought down here by foolish sentiment—by misplaced loyalty. I still say his trip has been in vain."

Linda and the Ranger, meeting each other's eyes, exchanged tacit messages of mutual trust. They had a love of old Gabe Weaver in common.

Linda Bartlett had inherited her striking blue eyes and wheat-gold hair from the Weaver side of her family, Hatfield noted. She was young—in her early twenties—and the form-fitting gingham dress she wore complemented a trim, well-rounded figure.

"Gramp won't confide in anyone, not even me," the girl went on, ignoring Gerlock's skeptical comment. "But even though he's ninety-seven, his mind is still sharp and clear at times, Jim Hatfield. His mind wanders, I'll admit, but if you can catch him when he's lucid I'm convinced you'll find out that he has truly discovered something important."

"Where could I see Captain Gabe?" Hatfield asked.

Linda's eyes went cloudy. "He's up at the cemetery—communing with Matt. Matt was buried at the spot where he was murdered, you know. Gramp came out of retirement to avenge his son's death." Suddenly, and in a different mood, the girl rushed on, "Let's go upstairs and have breakfast while we're waiting for Gramp to get back. He may stay up there for hours."

Gerlock said pointedly, "You admit the old man talks with spooks up there in boot hill, and yet you think he's competent enough mentally to give the Texas Rangers a clue to who's smuggling those rifles to the rebels across the river. Bah!"

Suddenly Jim Hatfield's eyes hardened. "Something must be wrong with *my* brain this morning," he said harshly. "Why did Larson try to kill me today? I'll tell you. To keep me from talking to Gabe Weaver. Linda, I've got to see your grandfather—before something happens to *him!* His life could be in extreme danger, now that I have actually reached Spanish Crossing to see him!"

Linda gestured toward the alley alongside her bakery shop.

"Just go down that alley and up the road to the bluff. You'll see the cemetery. It's only a stone's throw from here."

Gerlock said, "I'll come with you if you think—"

"No," Hatfield snapped. "I think Cap'n Gabe would rather see me alone. I'll bring him back as soon as I can, Linda."

Hatfield set off down the alley, beset by a strong apprehension that the old-timer he had come to see might, like Hatfield himself, be marked for death.

Emerging from the rear of the alley, he saw the cemetery on the bluff crest which formed the western end of Spanish Crossing, its adobe-walled enclosure occupying a bench of ground which forced the Rio Grande into a tight U-bend.

A road slanted up the weathered face of the bench, a road rutted by the hearse wheels and funeral corteges of centuries. The cemetery wall was far gone in ruin now. A scatter of marble and polished granite tombstones, most of them facing east toward the morning sun, were visible through breaks in the wall.

It was a short, steep climb to the main gate of the cemetery. Already the sun was intolerably hot. The sluggish brown waters of the Rio Grande did nothing to tem-

per the heat, here between the canyon walls. The air was rank with the smells of dead fish, rotting mud flats, tule brake and garbage from the Mexican village across the river.

An archway flanked by spiral-fluted sandstone columns formed the gate of the cemetery enclosure. The columns and the looping curves of the archway were done in the Spanish Mission style of architecture of the 1600s, similar to the façade of the old chapel across the river in Villa Segovia which Fancy Dan Kelso had preempted for his gambling casino.

WEATHER-ERODED carved letters in the keystone of the cemetery arch caught Hatfield's eye as he paused to rest at the top of the wagon road: ANNO DOMINI 1692. With a start, Hatfield realized that this burial ground was contemporary with the Spanish mission across the river. The first dead had been laid to rest here—or rather, this wall had been built to protect the sanctity of this *campo santo*—only two hundred years after the discovery of the New World!

That feeling of incredible age was weighing down Jim Hatfield's spirit when he stepped through the cemetery gateway and caught his first glimpse of the man who had helped found the Texas Rangers—Gabriel Weaver.

The old man looked more like a ghost than a living, breathing entity. He was kneeling, as if in prayer, before a grave mound some fifty yards away, his white hair gleaming like a platinum halo in the Texas sunshine. Hands, gnarled and knobby as dried-up mesquite roots, were clasped before his sunken chest. Gabe Weaver's face had withered away, it seemed to Hatfield, until it was little more than parchment stretched over a skull.

Hatfield walked slowly along the rubble path toward the old man. Just beyond Matt Weaver's grave, some twenty feet away, was a family mausoleum of native Texas fieldstone, equipped with rusty wrought-iron gates facing east to admit the dawn light into the tiers of crypts within. The mausoleum was marked "GUITEREZ" after some pioneer Spanish family.

Most of the graves roundabout—some of them more than two hundred years old—were weed-grown and unmarked. There were a few marble or granite tombstones, but most of the markers were warped boards or crosses made of maguay wood. One was adorned with a Confederate battle flag.

Hatfield halted a few feet from old Gabriel Weaver.

This frail oldster, wearing the faded uniform he had worn in the Mexican War, had helped make history. He had known, in person, such greats as Houston, Colonel Bowie, Davey Crockett, and other men of such giant stature. Gabe Weaver had helped Texas win its independence, as a youth. He had helped organize the first Ranger battalions to fight Indians on the frontier. When Gabe Weaver died, an era would have ended.

"Captain Gabe—"

Hatfield spoke timidly, afraid the old man would not know him. But Gabe's hearing was good. His eyes opened, surveyed Hatfield, and recognition lighted their rheumy depths.

"Jim—you've come!" Weaver's voice was a sepulchral whisper. "I knew you would, if I sent fer ye. It was Cap'n McDowell I was afeared wouldn't let you know. They think I'm loco, Jim. But I got big things to tell you. For the honor of the Texas Rangers—"

Hatfield stepped forward, intending to give old Captain Weaver a hand up, but the oldster picked up a gnarled cane lying beside his son's grave and came to his feet without help. His back was ramrod straight and his grip, bony as a skeleton's handshake though it was, was firm and without tremor.

"It—it's good to see you again, Cap'n Gabe," Hatfield said huskily. "I came as quick as I got McDowell's wire. He said you had dug up a lead in the Triple R business."

The old ex-Ranger's mouth was a puckered crack under stringy, time-yellowed mustaches. He said in a voice that quav-

ered with senility, "You don't think I'm loco, do you, boy?"

"Of course not, Cap'n Gabe. I wouldn't be here if I thought that."

The tension seemed to go out of Weaver at this reassurance. The old man turned to stare out over the roofs of Spanish Crossing, at the outlines of the bridge which were beginning to shimmer in the heat-weaves.

"Illegal firearms," croaked the old man, "are crossin' into Mexico at the rate of a shipment per week, right here, Jim. I got proof. Proof from my boy Matt, from beyond the grave, but proof. Guns goin' below the Border to that Mex'can Genril, Herk Delgado, who ain't a soldier a-tall but just a thievin' renegade!"

GRIEF touched Hatfield. The old man's reference to "proof" from his dead Ranger son was the first sign of mental wandering Hatfield had detected. Certainly Gabe Weaver's eyes were lucid, his words well articulated.

"What—what kind of proof, Cap'n?" Hatfield asked. "I thought maybe we could talk this over and then go down to breakfast. Linda and her man, Gerlock, are waiting for us."

Weaver turned around to peer straight at the Lone Wolf. Old as he was, and incredibly dessicated, he was a match for Hatfield's full height.

"Down at Linda's," he said "is this old map, Jim. Shows the Spanish mission acrost the river, the site o' both towns,

but hundreds of year afore Villa Segovia was big enough to call a town, more of a minin' camp."

Hatfield said politely, "I'll be interested in seeing that map, sir."

"Matt found it—I found it in Matt's possibles after he was kilt," the old man went on, a trace of bitterness creeping into his voice. "This boot hill cemetery here where they kilt Matt. it was the *campo santo* of that mission acrost the river, you know."

Hatfield made no comment. Missions always had their graveyards close by, not separated by a quarter-mile-wide river. Old Weaver's mind was drifting again.

"Reason the church was so far from the buryin' ground," Weaver went on, "was because it's solid rock over yonder, too hard to dig graves in. Over here, it's decomposed tufa, easy to dig."

Hatfield felt a clammy sensation go through him. By gosh, the old man's mental meanderings actually made sense! The date on the graveyard gate was 1692, proof that the early Spaniards and their Indian laborers had built the cemetery walls, at least.

"But the big clues weren't that map, but what was in the dirt with Matt's finger when he was shot," Weaver went on. He gestured with his cane at a spot near Matt's grave. "Right thar Matt was found, but he lived a few hours after the slug caught him, because he scratched somethin' in that hardpan thar with his fingernail. I didn't see it, you understand, because I was up in the Old Rangers' Home at San Saba when I got word Matt was kilt in the line of duty. But Linda's man, the marshal, Gerlock, he seen it, and copied it."

While he spoke, the old man was scratching letters and numbers in the dirt at Hatfield's feet. He said, "That's what Matt writ in the dirt afore he died, Jim."

Hatfield stared down at what the old man had written. It was gibberish: EDUARDA 1788 RIP.

"That—was the clue you figured out?" Hatfield said gently. "That has something to do with—this gun-running syndicate the rebels have operating in Texas?"

A cackling laugh escaped the old man's lips as he brushed the cryptic writing with the tip of his cane.

"Give Matt the credit—he found it. I figgered out what it meant. I got my proof. The sexton's key did it, Jim."

"The sexton's key?" Sensing that the old man's words might be important, even though they sounded insane, Hatfield added, "Can you explain that, Captain Gabe? I don't exactly follow you."

The old man was hobbling along the path now, as if he had forgotten Hatfield's existence. Overtaking him, he heard the oldster mumbling, "Explain it better when you see that parchment map of Matt's. Got it down at Linda's."

They were walking through the arched gateway now, the full panorama of Spanish Crossing spread out along the river below them. Horses were hitched to tie racks along River Street; armed Border guards were patrolling the high wire fence, their rifles flashing in the sun. Across the river in Villa Segovia, a church bell was summoning the village devout to eight o'clock mass.

THE sound of children calling to each other, the braying of a donkey, the cackle of poultry carried distinctly across the river, though the Rio Grande was a good three hundred yards wide at this point.

"They're shovin' these guns below the Border right under the noses of the Customs boys an' the Border Patrol," Captain Weaver chuckled, leaning heavily on his cane at the start of the wagon road leading to the street below. "But I wanted the Rangers to git the credit. One Ranger in partic'lar, you, Jim, the Lone Wolf. I been so proud of you."

Hatfield said, his eyes on the Casino Del Coronado across the river, "Does Fancy Dan Kelso fit into the smuggling of those guns, by any chance, Cap'n Gabe?"

The old man cocked a bird-bright eye at his former protégé.

"Kelso's the man who takes delivery on the Mex'can side, Jim. He's the hombre Gen'ril Delgado contacts. But I'm gittin'

ahead of my story. First we got to get the sexton's key—"

A thudding, slapping sound cut off the old man's reedy half-whisper: the sound a bullet would make hitting bone and skin and dessicated flesh. An invisible force seemed to lift Gabe Weaver off his feet and hurtle him downhill. One instant he had been at Hatfield's side, resting; the next, he was rolling over and over through the dust of the sloping road.

A split clock-tick behind the bullet's smashing thud, Hatfield's ears were stunned by the concussion of a gunshot, somewhere behind him, seemingly at his very heels.

Pure instinct drove the Ranger's hands to gunstocks; his reflexes dropped him automatically to the ground, spinning even in midair to face the cemetery gate they had just left.

From the loudness of the gunshot, Hatfield expected to face a bushwhacker only yards away. But he saw nothing—and the nearest shelter, the crumbling rock wall, was at least twenty feet away.

His eyes raced along the top of the broken wall, searched what he could see of the cemetery beyond it. Nothing moved there. Yet someone had fired that shot which had snuffed out Weaver's life like a candle flame in a gale.

For the old man was dead; there was no question in Hatfield's mind about that. His eye even retained a memory of the puff of dust from Weaver's shirt where the bullet had struck, with force enough to carry the frail oldster off his feet.

Coming to his feet, Hatfield raced to his left, putting the rock barrier of the cemetery wall between him and the killer he knew had to be skulking behind it.

Reaching the wall, he halted, panting, then held his breath to keen the roundabout quiet. He could hear a breeze rattling dead grass on a grave mound, on the other side of the wall; he could hear a flag flapping, a Confederate flag he had noticed on one of the graves just inside the gate. But no sound of a retreating footstep, a sixgun being cocked.

Making his way toward the nearest break in the wall, Hatfield risked a glimpse inside. Astonishment shot through him. No one was hiding behind this wall—and yet someone had to be! The loudness of that gunshot was proof that Weaver's bushwhacker had been near by . . . very near by.

Glancing around, Hatfield saw that Weaver's tumbling body had come to rest against a clump of ocotillo cactus midway down the slope. Even at this distance, Hatfield could see the blood blossoming like rose petals on the old man's shirt.

Less than thirty seconds had transpired since the gunshot had blasted Weaver into eternity. It was impossible that the killer could have run far, or avoided stirring up a tell-tale dust.

Hatfield raced through the break in the cemetery wall and looked around. There was only one object—even counting the tombstones—large enough to hide a gunman. That was the square stone mausoleum, twelve feet square by ten feet high, directly beyond Matt Weaver's grave.

HATFIELD'S heart slugged his ribs as, running toward the mausoleum, his nostrils detected fresh gunsmoke. A moment later he was at the rusty, padlocked iron gate of the mausoleum, looking inside. The place was empty; the three walls were like marble drawers in a marble dresser, each the door of a burial vault, each carved with the name of a departed member of a pioneer Spanish family, descendants of Pablo Guiterez, whose name was carved over the door lintel. Floor and ceiling were mortared Italian marble.

"The killer could be hiding behind this building."

Hatfield left the mausoleum doorway, guns palmed, and turned the corner to head along the north wall. The sun sent his shadow ahead of him as he neared the northwest corner. Around that wall, Weaver's slayer might be waiting alongside the west wall, gun ready.

Hatfield reached out one arm, letting his sixgun show around the corner, his grip loose on the stock in case a point-

blank bullet knocked the weapon from his hand.

Nothing happened. Anticlimax brought the sweat leaking from Hatfield's pores as, gathering himself, he leaped around the corner, gun ready to blast a slug down the west wall.

But no one was hiding behind the mausoleum. Furthermore, no one had been, recently. Blow sand had drifted ankle-deep against the base of the stone wall. Only the tracks of night crawling bugs broke the rippled surface of that sand.

Disbelieving, Hatfield made his way along the west wall and had his look around the corner at the south wall of the burial vault structure. The blow sand was untracked there.

"Nobody was hiding in the cemetery, then."

The cemetery covered two acres, a square field enclosed by the stone wall. Hatfield circled that wall, looking for sign, but found nothing. This high, exposed bluff offered no possible hiding place for a lurking gunman.

It was uncanny, bordering on the supernatural. He had heard the shot, he had seen Weaver at the instant he was hit, he had investigated immediately—and his findings were zero.

"It's going bareheaded in this heat," Hatfield muttered, starting at last down the hillside toward the sprawled corpse of his old friend. "I'm losing my senses."

The bullet had passed clean through the old man's body. A copper-jacketed rifle bullet, probably. There was a serene, almost happy twist to the dead man's lips. He had died with his story untold, but Hatfield no longer doubted that Weaver had had a valid story to tell. A story that would have broken the Triple R gun-running mystery to the undying glory of the Texas Rangers.

Lifting the frail, dried-up body in his arms—he doubted if this incredibly old Texas pioneer weighed little more than eighty-five pounds—Jim Hatfield started carrying his burden down the sloping road toward the town.

"You didn't die in vain, Gabe," he muttered in a choked monotone. "That bullet was probably meant for me . . . but I was spared to carry on for you."

CHAPTER VII

Fancy Dan Kelso

HATFIELD, Marshal Gerlock, and Linda Bartlett sat at a table in Linda's rooms above the bakery shop, staring at the mildewed parchment map old Gabe had found among Matt Weaver's possessions after the Ranger's murder.

The younger Weaver had found the chart in the archives of the old church across the river. Its faded brown inscriptions identified the twisting Rio Grande, the early-day Spanish mines on the Mexican side of the river, the site of Villa Segovia and its mission. Where Spanish Crossing now stood was nothing at all except the cemetery up on the bench, and the Guiterez mausoleum.

"This doesn't tell us a thing," Linda said in a taut whisper. "Gramp would never let me look at it. It seemed important to him."

The Lone Wolf pointed to a zigzag brown line which crossed the Rio Grande, connecting the mission church with its cemetery on the north side of the river.

He said thoughtfully, "I disagree. That line connecting the two sides of the river—"

"It could be the route of the *conquistadores,* the old ford as it was three hundred years ago," suggested Gerlock. "Or a bridge that was long since been washed away by spring floods."

Hatfield glanced at Linda. She had recovered now from the shock of her grandfather's violent death. She had accompanied the Texas Ranger and the town marshal over to Overbaw's undertaking establishment to leave old Gabe Weaver's body to be prepared for burial. Then the three had returned to partake of a gloomy breakfast.

"Old Gabe," Gerlock theorized, "must have been shot with a long-range rifle, using a telescopic sight. A killer can't just vanish in thin air, without even leaving tracks."

"The gunshot was close behind us," Hatfield insisted, "and I got a faint odor of powdersmoke as I approached the mausoleum. There's got to be a logical explanation for this, I know, but your theory about a long-range shot doesn't hold up, Marcus."

Linda was poring over the map with a magnifying glass, in the hope of finding some clue which had escaped the naked eye.

"This map *has* to be important, somehow," she said. "Gramp saw something in it that we can't."

Gerlock smiled tolerantly. "I wish, Linda, your family loyalty didn't blind you to reality. Old Cap'n Gabe was driven insane by the shock of his son's death. Surely you know that. All the time he spent up at the cemetery, communing with Matt's ghost, muttering to himself, going around town bragging about bringing the Texas Rangers in to solve the mystery—"

"No!" Linda choked. "He — wasn't crazy. He was trying to tell us something. He was killed to keep him *from* telling!"

Hatfield spoke quickly to stop an argument from developing. "We've got a few other items to unravel. Such as the mysterious letters and figures Matt wrote in the dust of the graveyard before he died. You were smart to copy them down, Marshal."

"But what use are they?" Gerlock asked. "'Eduarda 1788 rip'? What kind of sense do they make? A woman's name? An old date, another word? They didn't make an iota of sense to me when I saw them in the dust alongside Ranger Matt Weaver's dead body that morning, up in the cemetery. They probably didn't make any sense to Captain Gabe, either. If they had, it was his duty to have told me, marshal of the town."

Hatfield said, "I'll grant you this—that the old man *was* mentally off in his fierce desire that the Texas Rangers should be called into the case. Because I'm convinced, Linda, Marcus, that all of this is somehow concerned with the smuggling of guns to Delgado's rebels across the river!"

He glanced at his watch. This was the most interminable morning he could ever remember. It was only eleven o'clock now, two hours before Inspector Conway would unlock the gates at the International Bridge. One of the first things Hatfield wanted to do was get to the Mexican side of the river for a close-up look at the old Spanish Mission which Fancy Dan Kelso now used as a gambling den. For Gabe Weaver had told him, almost with his last breath, that Kelso was the man who turned smuggled Winchesters from Texas over to the rebel general, Heraclio Delgado.

LINDA asked, pressing a handkerchief to her eyelids, "What were Gramp's last words again, Ranger?"

"Something about getting the sexton's key," Hatfield recalled.

Linda frowned thoughtfully. "The sexton's key. Who would qualify as a sexton in this town, Marcus? A sexton is a keeper of a cemetery. Would that be Dave Overbaw, the undertaker?"

A small TEXAS TALE

SURROUNDED

A TEXAS cowpoke, in a big city for the first time, had imbibed too freely and while trying to find his way back to his hotel walked into a telephone pole. He circled it several times, then sat down on the sidewalk and shook his head dejectedly.

"It's no use," he moaned. "I'm fenced in."

—Al Spong

The marshal shook his head. "I'd say it would be old Sam Guiterez, the hostler at the Wells Fargo office," Gerlock said. To Hatfield the lawman explained, "There used to be a fancy wrought-iron gate up at the cemetery, but Hallowe'en pranksters made off with it, probably dumped it into the river so as to let the spooks out of the graveyard, I suppose. Anyway, old Sam Guiterez, as last survivor of the old Spanish family whose land grant included the site of Spanish Crossing, had custody of the cemetery key. I suppose you might call him a sexton."

Suddenly Hatfield snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute! There's another lock out at that cemetery. The Guiterez mausoleum gates have a big padlock on them."

"Yes," Linda agreed. "Every Decoration Day old Sam goes up there to put fresh flowers in the wall urns to honor the memory of his ancestors. One of those tombs has his name on it, and his date of birth—"

Hatfield said earnestly, "Borrow the mausoleum key from Sam Guiterez, Linda, and find out if he ever loaned it, at any time, to either Gabe Weaver or to Matt . . . I'm going to take a pasear across the river to Kelso's gambling casino."

Gerlock's jaw dropped. "What possible good would that do? The man's an outlaw. His own bodyguard tried to murder you—"

"I want to get over there and have a look around the old mission ruins before the gambling crowd begins to pour in when the Border gates are opened at one o'clock," the Lone Wolf said. "If I could look around, I might spot a few signs that could be valuable. Such as locked rooms where Delgado's rifles might be stored—details like that. Old Gabe was quite definite about Fancy Dan Kelso being a gunrunner."

Gerlock looked dismayed. "Kelso wouldn't even let me on the premises. What excuse would you have for getting Conway to open the gates for you?"

"I'll be delivering the coffin containing Juan Chisos' body to his former employer. That's pretext enough. And I'll be back not later than two hours from the time I start across the bridge."

"Don't be a fool!" exploded the lawman. "Kelso's a known owlhooter, he's surrounded by gunmen like Chisos. They'd kill you!"

"Not if I tell them you're going to have the *rurales* come and get me if I'm not back on Texas soil on schedule," Hatfield said. He was already heading for the door.

The easy-going marshal of Spanish Crossing found it hard to gear his thinking to the dynamic, rapid-action methods of this Texas Ranger.

At the doorway Hatfield turned to the white-faced Linda: "Look up that sexton, Sam Guiterez, and ask him if your grandfather borrowed a mausoleum key from him recently. I keep remembering I smelled fresh gunpowder smoke in the vicinity of those vaults."

Gerlock hurried down the steps after Hatfield. "I'll come with you, Ranger—"

Hatfield shook his head. "You're my life insurance, don't you savvy that, Marshal? You know I've gone across the river to see Kelso. I'll make certain Kelso knows that. He wouldn't dare detain me. After all, he's got to keep in the good graces of the *rurales*. At least while the present government is in power."

Five minutes later Hatfield was knocking on the door of Dave Overbaw's undertaking parlor for the second time in the past hour. The place was little more than a shed at the end of a blind alley behind Baldy Cragghorn's big freight storage warehouse.

Men's voices muttered inside, then the door was opened and a peon servant of Overbaw's let him in.

"Ah—Ranger Hatfield again!" Overbaw greeted him, coming out of the shadows of the gruesome place. "The hombre who brings me new business every time he crosses my threshold. Soon I will be paying you a commission, Hatfield."

HATFIELD winced. Death was never a topic on which to hang humorous remarks for a man who lived as close to it as Hatfield had done ever since he had be-

come a Texas Ranger. Besides, this morgue of Overbaw's was the most dismal place of its kind in which Hatfield had ever found himself.

The shed—which claimed to be the main "funeral parlor"—had been built against the base of the cliff overhanging the town, covering an old prospect hole, or mine tunnel, in which Overbaw stored tons of block ice the year round. This ice house was the one to which Inspector Conway of the Customs House had referred this morning as the place to store Juan Chisos' coffin.

Overbaw led Jim Hatfield into a curtained-off room where two dead men, draped with white sheets, lay on stone tables. One was the body of Gabe Weaver; the other of Einar Larson, the livery stable owner from Junction. Hatfield had been indirectly responsible for both of these dead men winding up here; and a third, Juan Chisos, was in storage in the ice cave.

Overbaw had visitors to the funeral parlor this morning. Hatfield's jaw hardened as he saw Baldy Cragghorn sitting on a bench in a far corner, playing checkers with a cadaverous-faced man in a red shirt. Blackie, the magpie, seemed to recognize Hatfield, for the bird looked up and greeted him with the familiar, "Tinhorn sport!"

Cragghorn, drawing on his vile-smelling cheroot, glanced up from his concentration on the checkerboard, recognized Hatfield, and commented, "What, no dead body? You're slipping, Ranger. Overbaw considers you his best business-getter."

Ignoring the hotelman-freighter Hatfield said to Overbaw, "Hitch up your hearse, Overbaw. We're delivering that coffin to Fancy Dan Kelso immediately."

Overbaw looked startled. "What's the use of that, man? Chisos will be planted on this side of the river anyhow. If it wasn't Sunday I'd have gravediggers workin' on a hole for that half-breed already."

Hatfield said grimly, "I have a hunch Dan Kelso sent Chisos up the line to waylay me. I'm going to bring the bird back to his home roost."

Overbaw looked flabbergasted. "The Border gates at the bridge don't open until one o'clock Sundays."

Hatfield snapped, "This is a special situation. I'm going over to make arrangements with Inspector Conway now. Have the coffin over there in ten minutes, Overbaw, or you'll answer to the law for obstructing justice."

Overbaw's head bobbed in agreement. "Okay," he said in a harsh whisper. "I'll be at the bridge quick as I can hitch up."

Over in the corner, beyond the sheeted figures of the dead on the slab tables, Cragghorn and his checker opponent were concentrating on their game. The magpie, watching Cragghorn make a move, gave vent to a burst of Chihuahuan profanity; and as Hatfield ducked through the curtained partitions the bird's taunt followed him derisively, "Tinhorn sport! Tinhorn sport!"

Hatfield headed up the alley past the brick wall of the freight depot, crossed over the board sidewalk on which grisly bloodstains still showed where Einar Larson had died this morning, and turned east toward the Customs House.

Five minutes later he was confronting Inspector Mike Conway with his demands to be permitted across the International Bridge an hour and a half ahead of schedule.

"You've already inspected and sealed the coffin I'll be taking to Mexico," he pointed out. "I want to get over there and have a look around Kelso's casino before the big rush from the Texas side of the river."

Conway protested, "I could let you through the gates on this side, all right, but you wouldn't have an entry permit to show the Mexican authorities. It has to be issued by the proper office on this side."

Hatfield thrust a finger in the lining of his left cowboot and brought out his circle-enclosed silver star engraved, "TEXAS RANGER." Pinning it to his shirt, he said:

"The Mexican border guards will recognize what this hunk of tin means, I reckon."

CONWAY shook his head. "Midway across the bridge, where the actual border is, that Ranger badge won't be worth a damn. Don't get too big for your britches, Hatfield."

Through the window of the Customs office shack Hatfield saw the black-plumed hearse coming, drawn by four black horses, with Undertaker Dave Overbaw driving. Inside the glass-paneled hearse he recognized the black coffin containing Juan Chisos' body.

"Mike," Hatfield said patiently, "you and I have worked for the law along this Border for a long time. I'm telling you this: I beileve Fancy Dan Kelso is directly connected with this Triple R gunrunning deal. Taking Chisos' coffin across the river is just a pretext. I want to meet Kelso, I want to size up his casino. I promise you I'll be back in one hour."

"But you've got to get past the Mexican officials—" Conway gave up in disgust. Turning to his desk, he scribbled a brief note on an official slip of paper bearing the Great Seal of the United States of America. He commented, "Guard on duty Sundays is a friend of mine. I suppose he'll forget regulations—for a bona fide Texas Ranger."

Seated beside Overbaw on the black-painted hearse, Jim Hatfield headed across the Spanish Crossing bridge, while Conway closed and locked the gates behind them.

A startled Mexican border official, his uniform hung with battle medals and a bayonet affixed to his rifle, rushed out from his guardhouse to halt the familiar black-plumed vehicle. A glance at the official paper from Conway had the proper effect; the Mexican patrol inspectors, noting that the coffin had been sealed on the American side of the river and therefore presumably did not contain any contraband and items, slammed the glass doors of the hearse and waved the hearse through the Mexican gates.

"You know where to go," Hatfield said, as they rattled up the narrow Mexican street, crowded with brown-skinned children, chickens, goats, and burros. "Fancy Dan Kelso's gambling den."

Overbaw guided his black horses up the steep street leading to the moldering Spanish mission on the bluff overlooking the river.

The undertaker said, "Maybe you don't know that Kelso is an outlaw in Texas. He might get ideas, seeing a tin star heading in his direction."

Hatfield smiled thinly. "It wouldn't surprise me if Kelso isn't expecting me, Overbaw. I'll lay odds he was up on the parapet yonder with a telescope, watching us cross the river. That's one reason I'm wearing my badge in plain sight. There's a limit to what even Kelso would do, even from the safety of Chihuahuan soil. Murdering a Texas Ranger is one of those things he wouldn't dare attempt."

Threading through the street traffic—worshipers returning from mass, ox-drawn *carrettas* laden with firewood and hay and vegetables from interior farms, throngs of children, poultry and livestock, it took the hearse the better part of half an hour to make the relatively short climb to the Casino del Coronado.

Along the way, respectful silence instead of the usual gay Mexican clamor marked the passage of the grim death-wagon from the Texas side of the river. Sight of the silver star on the handsome gringo's shirt caused its own buzz of excitement after the macabre equipage had passed.

At length Dave Overbaw was halting his black wagon with its drooping black plumes inside the crumbling walls of the ancient Spanish mission overlooking Villa Segovia's roofs and congested streets.

Hatfield's heart was racing with excitement as he glanced around at the bell tower, the domed sanctuary that now was a roulette room, the tiled roofs, the arched windows and doorways.

Old Gabe Weaver had branded Fancy Dan Kelso as the usurper of this once sacred building, as a key member of the

gun-running syndicate which was keeping a revolution going full blast here in northern Mexico. That might or might not be true, but Hatfield was fully aware that Kelso was wanted for murder north of the border.

The Lone Wolf was climbing down from the hearse onto the hard-packed gumbo of the Casino del Coronado's outer courtyard when a tall, smiling American in traditional *gaucho* costume of old Mexico emerged from a shadowy arcade.

"Fancy Dan Kelso," Overbaw whispered. "I got my doubts if you get back out of this yard alive, Ranger."

CHAPTER VIII

The Magpie's Call

HATFIELD was careful to keep his hands well away from the butts of his low-slung sixguns. The real menace of this moment was not from the silver-plated *pistolas* protruding from Fancy Dan Kelso's scarlet silk sash. At this very moment, a dozen guns could be trained on him, from the slotted loop-holes in the masonry walls all about.

Fancy Dan Kelso was wearing a flat-crowned black velvet sombrero with gold tassels dancing around the stiff brim. He wore a yellow silk shirt and a braided *charro* jacket, flare-bottomed *gaucho* pants with red satin triangles slashing the outside of the legs, and high-polished black boots, lower of heel than riding boots would have been.

Diamonds glittered on Kelso's fingers: he'd even had a diamond set into each of his front incisors, which could account for the fixed smile pasted on the gambler's face.

Just out of hand-shake reach from his visitor, Fancy Dan Kelso halted, his black eyes ignoring the silver star on Hatfield's shirt. The Ranger's nostrils detected perfume on this dandified gambler king. Pomade spiked the tips of Fancy Dan Kelso's coal-black mustache. There was a touch of silver at the gambler's temples, though. Remembering this dandy's long career in outlawry, Hatfield realized that probably Kelso was in his late forties.

"Welcome to Mexico and the Casino del Coronado, *Señor Rangero,*" Kelso greeted the stony-faced Hatfield. "The sports-loving Americanos from across the river will not be here until later in the afternoon, of course, but if you come looking for a game of chance—"

The Lone Wolf's lips barely moved as he said, "I'm returning some property of yours, Kelso. I am Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger. Although I imagine probably you are well aware of that."

Not a muscle twitched on Kelso's smooth-shaven cheeks. He flicked a glance at the hearse, at the black coffin inside the glass-paneled doors. Dave Overbaw was chewing a toothpick, idly listening.

"I'll not pretend not to have heard of you, Hatfield," Kelso said finally. He was a trifle white around the mouth, and a fine dew of sweat stood out on his upper lip; but the man had been long and well-schooled in masking his inner feelings and was showing remarkable restraint. "In fact, I suppose the Casino should be honored at a personal visit from the fabulous Lone Wolf, as I believe you are called . . . What is this property of mine you are returning?"

Hatfield jerked a thumb toward the hearse.

"As you undoubtedly know, your trained gunny had bad luck up in Junction last night. Juan Chisos comes home feet first. The undertaker up in Junction will bill you for the box. Overbaw kept the body on ice this morning and transported it across the river. Which takes care of Juan Chisos."

Still Kelso's iron reserve showed no signs of cracking. Calmly folding his arms over his chest, he said, "Chisos was one of my house men, what in Texas you call a bouncer. He was on vacation. What he was doing up in Junction, I have no idea. He carried a price on his head in Texas." Turning to Overbaw, Kelso said, "Drive

around to the rear. My *mozos* will help you unload the coffin, Señor Overbaw. *Gracias.*"

Hatfield hooked thumbs in gun-belts and, gawking like any tourist, had his long look at the eroded walls, domes and belfry.

"Would you—uh—care to look around the establishment, Señor Hatfield?" Fancy Dan Kelso suggested, after the hearse had disappeared. "This mission has quite a history, you know. Dating back to the times when the Spanish Crown had copper and silver mines in these *cordilleras* behind the city."

Hatfield had to grin. Kelso's suggestion reminded him of the nursery rhyme about the spider inviting the fly into his parlor. But after all, his entire purpose in crossing the river this morning had been to get a look at Kelso's premises before the rush of gambling customers crossed the bridge.

"I'd very much like to see the lay-out, Kelso," Hatfield said. "Lead the way."

KELSO coughed. "I will have to ask you to check your guns at the door, Senor Hatfield. A rule of the house."

Hatfield made no comment as he was led to an arched entryway which, hundreds of years ago, had been the route the devout worshipers and Indian neophytes had taken to reach the altar of the now-ruined nave.

Waiting at the door was a villainous-looking Chihuahuan with a strong strain of Yaqui showing in his features. He stood beside a large file of pigeon-holes for the storage of customers' belt guns, and racks slotted for shotguns and rifles.

If Kelso had expected Hatfield to demur at the order to disarm himself, he was surprised. Without comment, the Lone Wolf unbuckled his twin shell belts and holstered Colts, coiled them into a compact bundle, and turned them over to the Yaqui doorman, receiving a brass disk with a number on it in return. The number matched the cubby-hole in which Hatfield's gun harness was stored.

"I might remind you, Kelso," the Lone Wolf said, "that I am due back on the Texas side of the river in less than an hour."

Kelso's smile was inscrutable. "Since you lay your cards on the table so freely," the gambler said, "I will show my own hole card. He tapped a manicured fingernail on Hatfield's law badge. "You have no legal jurisdiction on this side of the river. Whatever charges you could arrest me on, say, in Spanish Crossing, mean nothing in Mexico."

Hatfield curbed an intemperate urge to sink his fingers into the throat of this leering outlaw.

"Now that we understand each other perfectly," Hatfield said, "lead the way."

The first room Kelso showed his strange guest had once been a sanctuary devoted to worship; now it was profaned with baize-covered poker tables, chuckaluck cages, a faro bank.

Beyond that, in a room that had been a padres' kitchen and pantry, was a lavishly equipped roulette layout.

"Since there is a time limit on your tour," Kelso said with his first trace of nervousness, "I will be unable to show you all the gaming rooms, Señor Hatfield. I would not like to have it thought any harm had befallen you here. Or that you were being restrained against your will for any reason."

Hatfield smiled cryptically. He had known, from the flashing exchange of glances between Kelso and the doorman with the Yaqui face, that he had been marked for death the moment he'd removed his sixguns. Probably nothing would have pleased Fancy Dan Kelso more than to have been able to brag that he was the slayer of the famous Lone Wolf. But dread of official reprisals stayed his hand, and Hatfield knew he was far safer here in the very lair of the enemy than he would be, for example, on the streets of Spanish Crossing.

Hatfield's conducted tour of the ruins, not all of which had been restored for use as a gambling establishment, finally led him back to the front courtyard where Overbaw's hearse was waiting. Hatfield

had satisfied himself on one score. There were no large rooms where smuggled firearms could have been stored; Fancy Dan Kelso had shown him about freely.

"It has been a pleasure meeting you, Señor Hatfield," Kelso purred unctuously, as the *mozo* returned the Lone Wolf's guns and cartridge belts. "Next time I hope you will come during gaming hours and try your luck at our—"

A raucous, squawking noise and a beat of wings interrupted Kelso. A black

Kelso's cheeks had turned ashen below their sun tan.

"Blackie is another magpie, señor. He was sold to my former partner, Baldy Cragghorn, a year or so ago. This magpie is Blackie's sister. An institution around the casino. Some of my customers consider her their omen of good luck. She has even picked up the jargon of a gambling hall."

"Full house beats a busted flush!" the magpie squawked in Hatfield's ear.

"The men suggest we consider it a friendly warning, sir, . . . and get the hell out of here!"

shadow swooped down from a nearby window ledge and landed on Jim Hatfield's shoulder. A tame magpie!

"Tinhorn sport!" scolded the bird.

Hatfield's heart constricted. How had Baldy Cragghorn's bird got across the river, when its left wing was clipped, making a flight of more than a few yards impossible?

"Conchita doesn't mean what she says," Fancy Dan Kelso smiled. "You are a naughty bird, Conchita."

HATFIELD'S eyes drilled into Kelso's. "Conchita? This magpie's name is Blackie, over in Texas."

At the moment, Hatfield was standing with his hips against the hub of the front wheel of the hearse. Dropping a hand behind him, the Ranger rubbed a forefinger around the hub nut, dislodging a gob of black axle grease with his fingernail.

With his other hand, Hatfield reached up to catch the magpie by the legs, lifting it off his shoulder.

"So Blackie's your brother, eh, Conchita?" Hatfield said, reaching up with his other hand to seize the struggling magpie. "One thing for sure, Blackie can cuss a blue streak. In Español."

Fancy Dan Kelso laughed nervously. "A talent at which Conchita excels," the

gambler said. "It is the bad company she keeps, eh?"

The grease-smeared forefinger was out of sight under the threshing wing of the magpie. Unnoticed, Hatfield rubbed the black lubricant off on the magpie's feathers, then released the bird. With an indignant squawk of, "Tinhorn sport!" the bird winged away and disappeared through the entryway.

Hatfield climbed swiftly to the seat of the hearse. To Overbaw he said in a voice loud enough to carry to the unseen watchers he knew had him under a gun drop, "Time we were reporting back to the Port of Entry, Dave. We don't want the *rurales* coming up here to see if Kelso is forcibly detaining me."

"Adios," Kelso called, his voice carrying a tremor his iron self-control could not disguise.

Hatfield hipped around in the seat and called back, *"Hasta la vista!"*

The subtle nuance of that parting idiom would not be lost on the exiled renegade from Texas. *"Hasta la vista"* meant that the Lone Wolf would be paying this casino another visit!

CHAPTER IX

The Sexton's Key

PORT of Entry gates at either end of the International Bridge were still closed to traffic when Overbaw's hearse pulled up back at the U.S. Customs House. The short trip from the Casino del Coronado, which a man could have walked easily in ten minutes, had required the hearse over half an hour because of the congestion of the narrow Mexican streets.

Hatfield found Marshal Gerlock awaiting him at the Texas gates, in a high state of suspense. It was obvious that the young marshal had never expected the Ranger to return from Kelso's stronghold alive.

A throng of nearly a hundred persons was queued up at the gates, awaiting the one o'clock opening. Some were sightseers; the majority were Big Bend cowhands, freight-line muleskinners and townsmen eager to get across the river for a session of bucking the tiger at Fancy Dan Kelso's tables.

Hatfield swung down from the hearse and approached Inspector Mike Conway as soon as the official had unlocked the gates to permit Overbaw to enter.

"Have you let anyone cross since you saw me last—anyone at all, Mike?" Hatfield demanded.

Conway shook his head. "Not a soul. Only the fact that Overbaw was transporting a corpse kept me from a lot of abuse from the crowd you see waiting there."

"You're sure Baldy Cragghorn didn't cross this bridge?"

"Of course I'm sure. I have to check the temporary visa permit of every person who passes our turnstile, Hatfield."

Hatfield grinned. He headed past the barricade to join Marcus Gerlock.

"Jumping juniper, I'm relieved to see you back safe!" panted the marshal of Spanish Crossing. "Find out anything?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Hatfield said. "Marshal, how far can a magpie fly if it's had its wings clipped and the feathers aren't fully grown back?"

"Are you serious?"

"So serious, Marshal," the Lone Wolf said mysteriously, "that this whole gunrunning case may be solved by a talking magpie."

Without giving the dumfounded lawman a chance to figure that out, Hatfield headed off in the direction of Cragghorn's warehouse. Gerlock had to hurry to keep up with his reaching stride.

"Linda's got the sexton's key old Gabe was talking about," he reported. "The old man borrowed it from Sam a couple weeks back."

They turned in at the alley where Einar Larson had taken his pot-shot at Hatfield.

"Did Guiterez say what lock the key opened?"

"His family vaults, naturally."

Hatfield loosened his sixguns in holsters and then, remembering that they had been in the keeping of Fancy Dan Kelso's doorman, inspected the loaded chambers carefully. Reaching the end of the alley, he and the marshal halted before the door of Dave Overbaw's undertaking parlor. Overbaw was still unhitching the team from his hearse in the stable adjoining.

Without knocking, Hatfield stepped into the morgue and walked swiftly to the curtained partition. The sheeted bodies of old Gabe and the Junction livery stable man were as they had been earlier. And as changeless as the dead men were the checker players in the far corner—the oldster in the red shirt, and bald-headed, pot-bellied Cragghorn, elbow on knee, chin on fist, studying the checker board as he had been doing two hours ago.

And seated on Cragghorn's shoulder was the talking magpie, Blackie. In this silent, death-steeped room, the bird seemed the only vital, living thing. It cocked its head around and greeteed Hatfield as always: "Tinhorn sport!"

Hatfield strolled forward, halting alongside the checker game. Neither player seemed aware of his presence, wrapped up in their grooved concentration.

BUT Hatfield saw a pulse throbbing too rapidly on Cragghorn's forehead. Even for a checker player in an exciting situation, perhaps with high stakes riding on every move, Cragghorn was breathing too heavily.

"He's been exerting himself physically," Hatfield mused. "Like maybe taking a quick trip across the river and back inside during the past half-hour."

Hatfield held out his arm to Blackie. The magpie hopped onto his wrist. Cragghorn's taut lips seemed to go even tighter.

Now I'll know, the thought seared through Hatfield's brain, whether this is the same magpie I saw at Dan's Casino half an hour ago, or whether there are two magpies—

With his other hand, the Lone Wolf reached up under the magpie's wing. The feathers under that wing were sticky with viscid black axle grease.

Blackie and Conchita were the same bird! With a clipped wing, the magpie could not have flown across the river. The Port of Entry bridge was not yet open. Then how—

Cragghorn chose that moment to make a checker move. Pretending to notice Hatfield for the first time, the fat man lifted a hand in greeting.

"You and my pet hit it off purty good, Hatfield," Cragghorn said. "There's a Mexican over in Villa Segovia who breeds these magpies and teaches 'em to talk, in case you have a hankering to own one of 'em."

Hatfield handed the magpie back to its owner and, without comment, left the undertaker's shack. Not until they were out on the street, headed back toward Linda's, did Hatfield explain why he had wanted to inspect the magpie.

"I'm convinced that Cragghorn got across to the Casino to warn Fancy Dan Kelso that I was on my way with Chisos' body," Hatfield said, "and while Cragghorn was staying out of sight, the magpie flew out the window and betrayed him. So—the question is, how did Cragghorn get across the river so quickly?"

Gerlock said in dismay, "I'm positive he didn't cross the bridge. And he's too fat to have climbed over the fence and taken a rowboat across the river—even if the fence hadn't been under guard all the time."

Hatfield did not speak again until they had reached the bakery and Linda had called down from the second-story window that she would be down immediately with the sexton's key.

"I think we'll find that the Triple R gun-running uses the same route across the river that Cragghorn and his magpie used this morning," Hatfield said enigmatically. "So if we crack this case, we'll have to give due credit to a certain talking magpie!"

"And don't leave Linda out of the credit column, either," Gerlock conceded. "It

was her faith in her old gramp's sanity that brought you into the case, Hatfield. And if she hadn't come down here to take care of old Gabe, I'd never have met her."

As Linda joined them, Hatfield reached for the heavy, corroded bronze key to the Guiterez family mausoleum. "I think," he said gravely, "this key is going to unlock the mystery to this whole Triple R case, Linda. If it does, the Rangers will get the credit, all right—but the Rangers will both be dead. Your Uncle Matt—and your grandfather, Gabe."

The three of them headed up the bluff road to the cemetery where, a few short hours ago, old Gabe Weaver had played out his string. Gerlock and Linda, completely puzzled by the actions of this Texas Ranger, followed Hatfield through the ancient gateway, past the spot between the graves where, more than a year ago, Ranger Matt Weaver had been mysteriously bushwhacked.

Reaching the rusty wrought-iron grillwork which formed a gate to the Guiterez mausoleum, Hatfield inserted old Sam's big key in the green-corroded padlock, twisted it, and removed the open lock from its hasp.

ONLY when a member of the pioneer Spanish family died and his funeral cortege reached the mausoleum was this iron gateway opened. Rusty hinges creaked eerily as the Ranger swung the gates back and stepped into the gloomy, windowless room, its walls a series of stacked-up tombs.

Linda and the marshal, shuddering involuntarily, came in to stand beside Jim Hatfield. He was pointing at a carved inscription on the floor—the epitaph on one of the marble slabs where pioneer members of the Guiterez family had been buried, rather than entombed in an above-ground vault.

"Does that look familiar, folks?" he asked.

Linda stifled a gasp as she read the carved lettering at the Ranger's feet, deeply incised in the marble floor:

EDUARDA GUITEREZ
MDCCLXXXVIII
Requiescat in Pace

"It—it's something like the message Uncle Matt wrote in the dirt with his finger before he died," the girl said uncertainly. "At least the Spanish name Eduarda is—"

"Of course it is!" Hatfield cried. "You'll remember he wrote 'Eduarda—1788—rip'. A dying man couldn't put down an entire Latin epitaph. Eduarda is the deceased person's name who was buried here. MDCCLXXXVIII—that figures out to the Roman numerals for 1788. And *'requiescat in Pace'* is the Latin for 'rest in peace'—which is usually abbreviated R.I.P."

Linda and the marshal exchanged blank looks.

"But—but why should Matt have wanted us to know Eduarda Guiterez's epitaph?" Marcus Gerlock stammered.

Hatfield was down on his knees now, running his fingertips around the edges of the rectangular slab of marble which, being the lid of a grave vault, likewise formed a portion of the mausoleum floor.

"You'll notice the cracks of the other vaults are filled with dirt and mortar," the Lone Wolf said excitedly, "but Eduarda's slab is surrounded by an open crack—evidence that *this chunk of marble has been moved recently!*"

As he spoke, the Ranger found what he had been searching for. Imbedded in the carved design of the slab's decorative border was a bronze ring bolt, which the padres back in 1788 had used to lower the vault lid in place following Eduarda Guiterez' burial. At the opposite side of the slab was a similar ring bolt.

"Now watch closely," Hatfield said, getting his fingers under the two ring bolts. "I have a hunch this slab tilts on a pivot—and that this morning, Gabe's killer opened this grave *from the under side!*"

Linda and her fiancé paled as they saw the Ranger tug on the ring bolts. The marble slab measured three by six feet and was six inches in thickness. Ordi-

narily, no man could have budged it. But now, as Hatfield lifted with his forefingers only, the slab lifted as easily and noiselessly as if it had been the cover of a book. A counterweight held it upright.

The counterbalanced slab was a trapdoor opening on a rectangular black cavity dug into the earth—the open grave of a Spanish woman dead since 1788! A musty exhalation of air came from the black pit.

"There," Jim Hatfield said in a shaky whisper, "is the discovery Matt Weaver made after studying that old map. The discovery he passed on, after death, with the message he wrote in the dirt. The secret old Gabe figured out when he saw Eduarda's epitaph on this slab, and borrowed the sexton's key to get in here."

Linda was the first to find her voice. "But what—what does it mean, this opened grave?"

"I expect to find," Hatfield said, "that Eduarda's grave—accidentally or purposely we'll never know—taps an old Spanish mine tunnel which leads under the Rio Grande River. A tunnel which was indicated on the old map by that line we mistook for a path."

Hatfield lowered his legs into the brink of the opened grave.

"In other words," he said, "when Gabe Weaver said smugglers were sending guns below the Border, he meant *under* the boundary line, not *south* of it."

CHAPTER X

Into the Grave

STRIKING a match, Hatfield held it out over the black opening. The feeble glow revealed a ladder, its rungs made of poles lashed together with rawhide thongs in the fashion made familiar by Mexican peons. It was leaning against the rock wall of the grave. Then a gust of air issuing from the tomb blew out the match.

"That breeze proves this isn't a plain six-foot-deep grave," the Ranger said. "It's connected to a subterranean outlet to open air somewhere—and I'll bet my last blue chip that outlet is across the river at Fancy Dan's casino!"

Thumbing a cartridge from his belt, Hatfield dropped it into the grave. All three heard it strike bedrock some ten or twelve feet below.

Hatfield's eyes flashed with pent-up excitement as he lowered himself into the grave opening, tested his weight on the ladder rungs, and found them solid and secure.

"You—you aren't—going *down* there, are you?" gasped Linda.

"I think your grandfather went down this ladder, Linda," Hatfield said. "Old as he was, he had the strength to lift that delicately balanced marble slab."

Gerlock turned to his fiancée. "Hustle back to the house and wait for us, honey. I—I've got to apologize for being so skeptical all this time. I'm convinced now that Jim Hatfield is in possession of the secret of how those Yankee rifles are getting across the Border into General Delgado's hands. A tunnel under the river *has* to be the solution!"

Hatfield, only his head and shoulders showing above the floor of the mausoleum, said quickly, "You're not coming with me, Marshal. I'll need someone to protect me while I'm underground—to make sure this exit stays open."

Without giving Gerlock a chance to protest, Hatfield lowered himself into the darkness—ten rungs on the ladder before his boots touched solid bottom. Overhead, Linda and the marshal were silhouetted heads peering down at him, as if seen from the bottom of a shallow well.

Daylight reflecting from the white marble ceiling of the mausoleum revealed, however, that instead of standing at the bottom of a well, a tunnel stretched off in different directions from this vertical entrance, forming a square-angled corner as they met.

One tunnel sloped downward at a forty-five degree angle due south, toward the Rio Grande. The other tunnel sloped to-

ward the town of Spanish Crossing.

The tunnel across the river was shown on that map, Hatfield recalled, but the tunnel under the town wasn't indicated, so it must have been built in later years to connect up with this spot.

In inky blackness, the Lone Wolf started down the slope toward the river. He estimated he had descended fifty feet in vertical elevation before the tunnel—six feet high and three feet from wall to wall—leveled off. The roughness of the walls resembled old-time Spanish mine caverns which had been hacked out with hand tools instead of modern explosives. The echoes of his boots on the rubble underfoot seemed to travel off endlessly into this Stygian passageway.

The walls became dank with moisture; the ceiling dripped overhead. I'm under the river now, Hatfield whispered into the darkness. Somewhere along this tunnel a man would step from Texas into Mexico.

A few yards further on, without warning, Hatfield's groping hands encountered a wooden wall, a solid obstruction like a bulkhead barring further progress along the tunnel. Feeling his way along the wooden planks, he discovered that he had bumped into a tier of piled-up crates stacked from floor to ceiling.

Taking a gamble, Hatfield struck a match. As far as the light penetrated into the blackness toward the Mexican side of the river, the east wall of the tunnel was tiered with crates, each bearing a label:

MINING TOOLS. Ship via Cragghorn Wagon Freight c/o Rio Grande Junction, Tex.

One crate had been opened.

Winchester rifles! Hatfield gasped. Smuggled rifles waiting here under the river to be picked up by Delgado's troops!

AS THE match guttered out between his fingers, Hatfield made a decision. It was only fair that the American and Mexican border authorities should make the official seizure of this contraband in conjunction. The fact that a Texas Ranger, helped by two Rangers who had been murdered in line of duty, had broken the Triple R case would only reflect to the detriment of the other services. Let them take official credit.

Hatfield had seen enough. He headed back toward the Texas side, clambering up the steep slope the tunnel made to reach the mausoleum on the bluff. There he made his report to Linda and the marshal, waiting beside the marble trap.

"I'm going to trace the Texas end of the tunnel now," Hatfield said. "I'm positive it will lead me to Cragghorn's warehouse, since Cragghorn is obviously the shipper who brings the rifles to the Border, disguised as tools and mining equipment. Marshal, bring Mike Conway up here, to represent the U.S. Border Patrol, and you might send across the river for a representative of the Mexican rurales and Federal Customs. Then we'll move in and make our official raid."

With Gerlock and Linda on their errand, padlocking the mausoleum gates behind them for Hatfield's protection during their absence, the Lone Wolf descended to the tunnel and set off on the Spanish Crossing leg of the underground workings.

By counting his paces he could roughly estimate distance covered, even in the total darkness. He estimated he had come three blocks—the tunnel following the general line of the town's river front street—when he became aware of a faint glow of light up ahead.

Turning an elbow bend in the tunnel, he saw that the source of the light was an overhead opening at the eastern dead end of the passage. Dangling through the overhead opening was a heavy steel hook and the cables of a block and tackle—machinery used in lowering heavy crates of contraband underground.

A sudden clamor of sound reached Hatfield's ears as he approached the dangling cables—men's voices in excited conversation somewhere overhead, interspersed with the shrill voice of Blackie the mag-

pie chattering his familiar, "Tinhorn sport!"

Approaching cautiously, Hatfield peered up through the square opening overhead and got a view of roof rafters and piles of merchandise—cotton bales, barrels, crates, baled hay. The tunnel ended exactly where Hatfield had predicted—inside the brick walls of Baldy Cragghorn's freight warehouse.

He recognized Cragghorn's voice now, arguing with someone. "Old Gabe must have heard our mules hauling those loaded sleds under the graveyard. Sound carries through solid rock, you know. Maybe that's how Gabe got the idea of borrowin' the key from old Sam Guiterez and findin' that trapdoor. We're fools for not knocking off Guiterez long ago!"

Hatfield reached up to grip the floor planking of the warehouse. Whoever had used this trap-door recently had not thought it necessary to close it, inasmuch as the warehouse was closed to the public. Chinning himself upward, Hatfield saw that the trap-door in the floor was alongside the plank wall of what apparently was Cragghorn's business office in one corner of the warehouse. The sounds of argument came from that office. And Cragghorn's visitor was a man Hatfield had never expected to find on the Texas side of the river—Fancy Dan Kelso! For it was Kelso's voice he heard now:

"Anyway, we've got to move that last shipment of rifles before we dynamite the tunnel, Baldy. Delgado's whole offensive in lower Coahuila depends on getting those supplies. If we fail him now, the whole revolution falls to pieces."

"Let it!" cried Cragghorn surlily. "Delgado's depended on our help long enough—without paying off. I know when to quit. I tell you, that hombre Hatfield is closing in on us. Sooner or later he'll figure out how my damned magpie happened to be on the Mexican side of the river this morning."

HATFIELD pulled himself up through the trap-door and headed along the office wall, for the door around the corner. His sixguns were out of leather, the gunmetal gleaming dully in the light shafting through the warehouse windows.

"I tell you, we can't dynamite that tunnel and flood it forever until we move that two gross of Winchesters out of there, Baldy!" Kelso was saying. "That should put Delgado's revolution over the hump. The *Federalistas* are hanging on by their teeth. If Delgado wins, you and I are millionaires, Cragghorn—"

The door was open. Rounding the corner, Hatfield could see the two outlaws facing each other alongside the big iron safe bearing both their names.

One quick stride took Hatfield to the doorway. His shadow falling through the opening was the first inkling of danger to the two conspirators. Kelso, dapper in his gay-colored Mexican *gaucho* garb, was almost dwarfed by Cragghorn's elephantine bulk.

"I never hoped to cateh you on the Texas side of the Rio, Kelso," Hatfield said, cocking both his sixguns. "I'm arresting you both. Raise your arms and turn your backs to me."

Kelso's scream was like a banshee's waíl. His hands made their blurring sweep toward the gunstocks protruding from his satin sash; but before he could sweep the guns into the clear the Lone Wolf's right-hand Colt bucked and thundered, spitting its orange-purple nozzle of bore flame.

The black magpie on Cragghorn's shoulder shrieked profanity as Fancy Dan Kelso went down, clutching a bullet-smashed arm with his other hand, then crumpling in a dead faint.

Cragghorn glanced down at his partner, writhing with pain at his knees. Cragghorn was not wearing a gun; the skin-tight candy-striped shirt was not concealing a weapon of any kind.

The Junction freighter regarded Hatfield a moment through the milky layers of gunsmoke.

"I will not be taken alive like my partner, Hatfield!"

But even as he spoke the big man reached for a pepperbox pistol resting on

a stack of business papers on his desk.

"Hold it, Cragghorn!" The Ranger shouted his warning as Cragghorn scooped up the multi-bored weapon.

He tripped gunhammer, aiming to let his bullet knock the bulky pepperbox pistol out of Cragghorn's fist. But his snapshot missed its target and ricocheted instead off the safe at the smuggler's side.

It was that glancing chunk of wild lead which cut through Cragghorn's double chin and plowed at an upward angle into Cragghorn's brain, killing him instantly.

"Tinhorn sport!" squawked Blackie, digging his talons into Cragghorn's blubbery flesh as he rode his master's collapsing form to the floor. . . .

The week following Gabe Weaver's funeral and Linda Bartlett's wedding in Spanish Crossing, Jim Hatfield found himself in Ranger Headquarters in Austin, making one of his rare personal reports on a case to his chief Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell.

McDowell was in a nasty mood. "Why," thundered the choleric-tempered McDowell, "did the Border Patrol boys, and the U.S. Customs boys, and even the Mexican *rurales*, grab the lion's share of the publicity for this coup? Damn it, the Texas Rangers—Matt Weaver and old Gabe and you—teamed up to knock that Rio Grande tunnel out of operation."

The Lone Wolf grinned. "Do you want me to make my report," he asked mildly, "or groan about missing out on the big headlines? I preferred to keep out of the limelight."

McDOWELL retreated into his collar. "Go ahead, make your report. It just gripes me that credit in the newspapers didn't go where it was due. To the Texas Rangers."

"Speaking of credit," Hatfield said, "a black magpie named Blackie should get the credit for tipping me off that Cragghorn had some secret and quick way of getting past the Border guards.

"And Matt Weaver, two years ago, should get credit for getting the hunch a tunnel might be involved, and digging up the old map that put him onto borrowing the key to that mausoleum and finding out that Eduarda's tomb was really the gateway to that tunnel."

McDowell said, "As I understand it, the early Spaniards dug that tunnel acrost the river as a way to escape the Indian attacks—and when Fancy Dan Kelso took over the mission ruins, he ran across the Mexican end of the tunnel by accident."

"That's right," Hatfield confirmed. "That was five years back, when Kelso first escaped into Mexico and we couldn't extradite him. Then he teamed up with Cragghorn's freight outfit and they tunneled from boot hill to Cragghorn's warehouse. From there on all they had to do was get a customer for their smuggling—General Delgado."

McDowell consulted a written report Hatfield had sent him.

"While Kelso's waiting to be hung at the state pen, he's put the blame for Matt Weaver's and Gabe's murders on Cragghorn, I see. You think he's passing the buck or telling the truth?"

Hatfield shrugged. "I think Cragghorn did both murders. Standing on the ladder in Eduarda's grave and shooting out through the open grillwork of the mausoleum doorway. That's why Matt was found dead in the graveyard. And Gabe got his just outside the gate."

McDowell turned back to his stack of newspapers, and the misery returned to his face.

"So Gabe Weaver's granddaughter married the marshal down there," he said musingly. "I guess that means a wedding present I got to send the bride. Any suggestions?"

Hatfield appeared intent on rolling a cigarette. "I already took care of that, Captain. Presented the newlyweds with a unique pet to share their honeymoon house—a talking magpie. Cragghorn's bird Blackie. Every time it opens its mouth it'll remind Linda of you."

A rare grin broke the scowl on Roaring Bill's craggy face.

"Yeah? What does this magpie say?"

"Tinhorn sport," replied Jim Hatfield.

The baggy seat of his long-johns left them roaring

The Man From Peaceful Valley

by PETE CURTIS

THE cow prints and those of two shod ponies blended with myriad other fresh prints along the main cattle trail close in to the banks of the Old Easy River. Cougar Jones reined in, hooked a long leg around his saddle-horn and cuffed back his dust-bleached stetson.

Be a hell of a job sorting 'em out now, mused the Crow Track rancher, a frown rutting his bronzed brow. His gray eyes were a trifle soulful and distressed. His mood, for the moment, was as diametrically opposed to the sun bright morning as could be, for the theft of his cattle was like a personal affront. These sundowners around here were as good as telling him to his face that he was an easy mark. This was the third time since his arrival on the Three Rivers range that night-riders had knocked off some of his stock.

Five mossy-horns dropping from sight wouldn't break him, but for a young fellow ranching on his own for only a short time and giving every last silver-eagle a close-

Cougar Jones was so easy-going he wouldn't even shoot rustlers—till pretty Georgia McNary lit a fire under him

vest inspection in order to garner a profit, the loss bit a fair-sized chunk out of the ledger.

"Ah, well—" breathed Cougar Jones resignedly, reaching for his tobacco dust.

Hoof soundings pulled his lean face uptrail. He spotted Georgia McNary aboard her small pinto, evidently returning from Rainbow town to her pa's Big M outfit.

Of a sudden Cougar felt the sun's warmth penetrate his sluggish blood stream and evaporate cares and worries. Sight of that girl seemed always to have that effect upon him.

"Howdy, Miss Georgia," he greeted with obvious pleasure, his transformed mood backed by a flashing white smile. "You're out mighty early. A trek to town and back?"

"Errand for my mother," Georgia McNary told him somewhat haughtily, stopping her pony. "And what are you doing parked here by Old Easy, miles from your own range?"

"Now you've reminded me of my miseries again," said Cougar, with down-cast countenance. "I was just a-setting here trying to unravel some of my cow tracks from that mess of stompings in the trail there."

IN AMAZEMENT Georgia exclaimed, "You mean your stock drifts this far over?"

"Sure—when a couple or more jaspers haze 'em along."

The girl's dark brown eyes darted over the ground. "So that's it," she murmured. "They turned in here, all right. Headed in direction of Rainbow."

"Any number of places they could turn off—" Cougar began, then suddenly exclaimed, "Lookee there!" He was pointing uptrail to a jag of steers headed for water. "More stompings to cover the trail. See what I mean?"

Georgia's sun-burst hair flounced as she tossed her head with disgust. "You give up too quick, Cougar Jones," she scolded. "You always act happy when you can back away from a showdown."

"Now," said Cougar, feigning hurt, "that's no way to talk about Santy Claus. I just figure some poor old family man has got too many little scooters to feed, it all."

"That's just talk. You don't really believe it yourself. Being so soft-hearted gives you a good excuse not to back up your rights with a fight, that's all."

Sure as shootin', thought Cougar, she's needling me about the last dance when I backed down to Lurt Webb.

She was saying, "Just what would you do if you did run across your cows, Cougar?"

"Why, take 'em home, I reckon."

"Oh, you dunce!" the girl said peevishly. "I mean to the fellows who stole your cattle."

Cougar's brow puckered. "Hard to say. Never been in that tight before."

"Guess you wouldn't do anything. Never saw you pack a gun. Bet you don't even own one."

"I play around with 'em now and then," he replied shortly. His voice took on some hardness. "One thing, for sure. I wouldn't hang a rustler, like I've heard some have done in this neck of the woods."

Georgia McNary's eyes frosted over. "You're referring to the Cross Bar. Lurt Webb's father did that at a time when it was either make or break. I'll bet that place you come from—wherever it is!—wasn't always a land of milk and honey."

He didn't wilt before her cold stare, and still had the feeling she had taken the position she had because of Lurt. Still, he'd had no right to condemn others on hear-say. His home valley, where he had been born and reared, *hadn't* always been a peaceful layout, according to his father. Settlers like his pa had had to fight to make it peaceful. After his birth there never had been much trouble, and he could remember how pridefully his pa would speak of the land as Peaceful Valley.

He said, "Guess the air is too sweet where I come from."

Georgia unruffled a bit and asked curiously, "Why did you leave?"

"No elbow room back there. I wanted to get shed of my pa's halter and bust out on my own." He didn't tell her about the girl he'd lost to a fellow who had been set

up with land and house without having to spill a drop of sweat for it—a fellow not unlike Lurt Webb. The affair had touched him with bitterness for a spell, until he'd come to decide that a woman who reached first for security instead of love wasn't worth fretting over.

"So now you're the lamb who's blundered into the wolves' den," chided Georgia, a mocking smile curling her lip corners. Abruptly she neck-reined her pony and closely scrutinized the ground. Then she halted and stared back. "Well, come on, Cougar," she urged sharply. "Don't sit there like a dumb lump."

His eyes popped wide with surprise. "You're going to help me search out them tracks?"

"Somebody has to side a helpless ninny like you," she tossed back at him. "Anyway, if we *could* untrack these rustlers, I'd be doing my pa and the other outfits a favor. I've got a hunch it's part of the same gang that's starting to throw a wide loop again."

Cougar marveled at the spunk of the girl—one of the obvious traits that had appealed to him when he'd first met her. She was so unlike himself in this respect that sometimes her unbridled tendencies kind of alarmed him.

WHEN he put his horse alongside hers, she told him, "Keep an eye out for any turnoffs on your side, and I'll do the same over here."

For a spell they rode in silence, halting when they came to branch trails which revealed so many shod hoof imprints of horses among the multitude of cattle sign that Cougar knew only sheer chance would allow them to pick up the trail of his stolen beef. Yet what was more important was having Georgia McNary show interest enough to tag along.

He was prompted to say, "Dance Saturday night. Should I call for you?"

He knew it was pure impertinence and he grinned when he said it, even while feeling the sting of the girl's look.

"I've already been asked, thank you," she told him with lofty hauteur.

"Lurt Webb," he muttered. "Speaking of that galoot, reckon I roweled him some at the last dance."

"Well, after all, he was my escort, and you acted as though you owned me. I noticed you skedaddled quick enough when Lurt invited you outside to settle the matter."

That again, thought Cougar, suddenly deflated. She made it sound as though he didn't have any gumption at all, as though he were straight chicken-livered and slept on the bottom side of the bunk. Hell, didn't she understand that he wanted to be friendly with people? That he liked to live in peace with his neighbors?

"You just don't savvy me," he said at last, sadly wigwagging his head.

Georgia cast a sidelong glance at him, her eyes sharp with impatience and contempt not wholly restrained. "You certainly don't live up to your name, *Cougar* Jones. Is that your real name, or something your pardners pinned on you as a joke?"

He laughed suddenly, feeling good again. "It was a joke, all right," he explained, "but on my pa. Seems he was wearing the heels off his boots about the time I was born, pacing back and forth in front of our shack. The doc was inside with my ma and a neighbor lady, helping me on my way. Well, about the time I let loose with my first squawk, a painter out yonder screamed merry hell, too, and Pa—well, he just naturally keeled over on the spot thinking he was responsible for bringing a babe into the world with a voice like a cougar's."

Georgia was staring at him with a shocked expression painting roses on her cheeks. She held her peace for some time after that, Cougar chuckling to himself all the while.

Their search for the lost cow and pony prints came to nothing, but the girl prodded Cougar—again belaboring him with complaints of being too easy-going and lenient—into riding for Rainbow and reporting the theft of his cows to the sheriff.

When they finally parted, Cougar rode the remaining distance to his Crow Track spread under the influence of heavy-

browed musing. By the time he sighted his ramshackle buildings and corrals, he figured the gist of the difference between the Big M daughter and himself was their environment. It was as simple as that. Her rangeland—this Three Rivers country—bred fighting gents and ladies, and where he hailed from, everybody was peaceful and lived together in contentment—almost, anyway.

As was his habit when smitten by grave or ponderous cogitation, Cougar fished out his Colt and cartridge belt, strapped it on and wandered outside his shack. He potted away at various objects with remarkable accuracy, then ambled around drawing iron and blasting away at fence posts and the like, the motions purely mechanical and defying the eye of man or beast to follow the play at its swiftest, if such had been watching.

This was the sort of meditation Cougar had been doing since he had been old enough to own a gun. Unfailingly it left him in a restful frame of mind. Although it was expensive meditation, he compensated for it by having an innate distaste for red-eye and an impatience with gambling.

Maybe, by gum, he would show these dudes around here a little swagger from now on. Maybe next time, if Lurt Webb invited him to skin some knuckles, he'd just accommodate said customer. If that's what you had to do in these parts to catch the eye of the girl you had your eye on, then maybe he'd just have to grow more hair on his chest. . . .

THE Saturday night dance in Rainbow was always a magnet for ranchers roundabout, and their riders. Festive doings stirred the town until it would have been impossible for any one to say with truth that a Saturday night in Rainbow was like any other night.

Cougar Jones, primped and preened, was as airy-headed as the next when he rode in and racked his pony along with many others near the building which housed the meeting and dancing hall upstairs. The structure was set back from the street, the music he heard was a fast waltz, and laughter, mostly in womens' tinkling voices, drifted out on the warm night air.

A voice hailed Cougar from under a cottonwood as he headed for the dance hall. "How about a little cheer, Cougar," someone coaxed.

"No thanks, boys. Gotta keep my dancing feet under me."

They were just vague silhouettes under the tree, but he guessed them to be Big M riders. Another group, mostly Webb's Cross Bar crowd, he figured, was clustered at the foot of the stairs. They greeted him boisterously, but the ribaldry and jest which unmistakably laced their clamor simply rolled off Cougar's shoulders and left him untouched.

Somebody called as he started up the stairs:

"String up them cow-thieves yet, Cougar?"

His retort was jocular and swift, forcing a laugh or two. "Ain't got enough hemp at my place for that sort of shenanigans."

Dancing couples were whirling over the floor when Cougar stepped into the hall. His eyes, first of all, sought out Georgia McNary. Sure, she'd be dancing with Lurt Webb. She was. He caught her eye, his smile shining when she and Lurt swished by. My, but she was pretty tonight in a frothy yellow dress and with a blue ribbon in her hair. And that Lurt—he was sure struttin'.

With a boot toe Cougar tapped out a beat with the music, his eyes sort of dreamy. He waited out another go-round before he approached Georgia, noting that some other waddy had snitched her from Lurt for the time being. Weaving among the throng between numbers, he suddenly confronted her just as the music started up again, and with a twirl lightly took her away from Lurt and a couple of other bumble-toed dudes.

Georgia did not protest, except for just a momentary stiffening of her supple body, then her eyes flashed mischief and amusement at Cougar's brashness, and away she went with him. A good-looking buck with dancing feet was pretty hard

to resist, even if he was a character who would let his own shadow run over him.

"Where did you ever learn to dance so well, Cougar?" she wanted to know, her fragrant breath like a sweet prairie wind.

"Danced all the time back home, 'cept when I was asleep." He beamed down on her, and if ever he'd had a happy time in his life, it was right then. Not even Lurt Webb's sullen eyes, following them around the rectangular room, could bring him down to earth, not with that soaring feeling.

And Cougar picked up right where he had left off at the last dance, being a trifle possessive with Georgia again, adroitly steering her clear of Lurt and others by priming her with punch and moonlight. He wasn't wholly successful as the evening went on, not being a magician, but he did have her more to himself than did her escort.

Of course Georgia saw the fireworks sizzling, and knew well enough that a blow-up was imminent, but she really welcomed it, that pixie streak in her singing at high pitch. But she did make a bet with herself—that when show down came, Cougar would tuck tail again and go to dancing with the other girls.

She lost that bet, for of course she didn't know about Cougar's resolution to grow a thicker hide, when Lurt stepped up to the Crow Track rancher and told him to get lost.

"Free country," said Cougar. "And Georgia isn't complaining about my company."

Lurt Webb was black-eyed, black-haired, and right now his temper was likewise. He and his old man were one and two when it came to omnipotence on the Three Rivers range, and generally had things their own way, especially Lurt. The son of the Cross Bar owner was as tall and was as raw-hided as Cougar and prided himself on his success with women, fists and guns.

STABBING a finger against Cougar's chest he growled, "Last time you cried for mama. Now start crying again, or take a walk with me, Bub."

Georgia's gleaming big eyes swung expectantly to Cougar's face. She saw his lower lip push out thoughtfully, his eyes narrow, and she felt a swinging excitement when Cougar drawled to Lurt:

"Reckon you don't know how to get along with a feller, lest you bust noses with him. Well, I'll oblige you, if it's what you want."

Lurt Webb, angry, as the set of his shoulders announced, led him down the stairs and around toward the back of the building. Cougar was almost anxious to get to mixing it, he was that aggravated. He'd put a stop to this darn foolishness once and for all, or damn near die trying. This rooster-struttin' Lurt, always hanging up the hands-off sign and howling like the he-wolf of the pack. . . .

And as he followed Lurt past a back corner of the building, the pack, sure enough, swarmed over Cougar. He struggled blindly, wildly for a moment—then knew it was useless. They had his arms pinned and his legs clamped. There were seven or eight of them. Cross Bar riders.

He sensed a fierce playfulness in the way they man-handled him. A guttural chuckling kept bubbling from one of them. They jerked his boots off and in their frenzied enthusiasm about ripped off his pants and shirt. The smell of dust, sour whisky breaths and bunkhouse tracings mingled around his head.

Of a sudden he knew what he was in for. "Now, boys," he protested, "I can go along with a joke, but this—"

"Shut up, Cougar, or you'll end up in your birthday suit!"

A couple of all-the-way types responded to that suggestion in tipsy glee, but Lurt Webb snapped, "That'd be too raw. Put his boots back on and pack him up there."

The arrogant order compelled Cougar's lean muscles to strain mightily against his tormentors again, but with so many hamstringing him he made a sorry showing. Amid harshly expended breathings and gruntings he was swiftly propelled around to the building's front and, in a clattering racket of boot stompings, was borne bodily up the stairs. He struggled for all he was worth, but to no avail.

When the tight-knit gather of Cross Bar riders and their long-john encased, cherry-cheeked burden rolled through the doorway and into the dance hall, dancers scattered like spooked quail and the music staggered to a halt. With the flanneled, red-garmented Cougar Jones being forced to the center of the floor, hysterical laughter and screeches of the girls set up a general din throughout the hall.

A Cross Bar rider waved his hat.

"Strike up the music, Tex!" he shouted. "There will now be a solo fandango number by Cougar Jones!"

They threw him roughly then, booted feet kicking air and rump sliding across the floor. They spilled back quickly through the doorway in unison. Cougar was close on their heels, after a springy, bounding leap off the floor. The baggy seat of his long-johns was a sight that left the dancers rocking and howling with mirth—a sound that had the authority of clubs raining down on Cougar's head and shoulders.

He plunged pell-mell down the stairs, battering aside any and all who hampered his retreat, rushed around the rear of the building and plucked up his scattered clothing and donned it with the haste of life and death import. He practically ran to his racked pony, and at a high-tail dash hammered along the street and out of Rainbow, where all-encompassing night swallowed him like a mother wing.

He was half-way home before he felt anything approaching normalcy and sanity returning—and oh, lordy, but that had been a nightmare of embarrassment! How those folks did holler! He could feel his cheeks bloom rosy again at the mere thought of it.

Lurt Webb was sure an unpredictable cuss, full of roguish schemes and fancy doings. No wonder Georgia McNary was under his spell!

COUGAR could well imagine how much the spirited girl had enjoyed that farcical and uproarious scene. His mouth corners twitched, then his lips stretched to grin broadly, and before long his laugh was ringing resoundingly beneath lonesome stars. His pony rolled its eyes back at him and cut a streak through the night. And even the coyotes gabbling in the brush set up a yapping howl in his wake. . . .

The following afternoon a spell of meditation urged Cougar Jones to take up his Colt. Being a church-goer he normally would have attended the morning services in Rainbow, but after last night's buffoonery he'd decided to give the town a week's respite before he showed his mug there again.

Draw and shoot—slick as you please—and fifty yards distance a dirt clod simply disintegrated.

A cold feeling on the back of his neck slowly brought his head around. He had a visitor who, tight-reining a fiddle-footed pinto a prudent distance away was watching him with entranced eyes and parted lips.

Georgia McNary exclaimed, "Golly, I didn't know you could shoot like that! Didn't think you even owned a gun."

"Was shootin' all the time back home, 'cept when I was asleep."

Her head cocked with concern and puzzlement. "Cougar, you're not thinking of —of—"

"Huh?" His eyes dropped swiftly to the gun in his hand, then he slipped it into leather. "Shucks, no. I don't want to end up in my union suit again."

Georgia laughed and shook her bright head. She kicked the pinto forward. "You're a good old poke, Cougar. Goodness, I thought I'd never quit laughing last night."

"You're not doing a bad job of it right now."

"I can't help it!" she cried, and threw back her head to let a wonderful, clear sound enliven the Crow Track's bachelor drabness.

Cougar looked on with humorous forbearance, then said, "Need more of that around here. Come to think of it, this is the first time you've ever come calling."

It was strange to observe Georgia fidgety and flustered, for Cougar had begun to wonder if she were all pluck and effervescence. He was pleased at his discovery

of this latent, ladylike quality in her.

She said quietly, "Well, I didn't see you at church this morning, and I thought somebody ought to tell you not to feel so bad about last night, not to let it make you hide out like some old hermit."

"I'll be packing supplies away from Rainbow come Saturday," he said.

She smiled down on him, bouncy and ebullient again. "I knew you could take it—*and*, another thing—don't feel as though your stock alone has been singled out by rustlers. We were hit last night, mister, and hard, too!"

"Well," replied the surprised Cougar, "reckon I'm not the only soft touch on the Three Rivers range. Good to know."

"The Big M a soft touch!" she cried laughing now. "Why, Dad and the sheriff have already got a posse and are tracking those theives down right now. Bet they bring 'em in, too."

"I'll bet they don't," snapped Cougar, grinning.

"Bet they do."

"Well," said Cougar, rubbing his chin. "Hope they do, anyway. Get down for a spell, Georgia—if you're not scared of what Lurt Webb will think of such doings."

"Just for that, mister," Georgia retorted, "I *will* get down. And I'll cook supper for you, too. . . ."

Everybody in the Saturday crowd in Rainbow had their snickers at Cougar's expense but he bore up under it. A character they believed him to be, yet he wasn't a sore-head, and they liked him for it.

ABOUT everybody had ridden in—Georgia and her folks, Lurt Webb and his old man, and punchers from four directions. Cougar himself had ridden into town early, as soon as Georgia had headed for the Big M. Now Cougar had enough, but he had one last errand before puling homeward. He needed to replenish his supply of .45-caliber meditation cartridges. He stepped to the powder-dust street to angle for the saddle and gun shop. Lurt Webb, leaning indolently against a saloon's board awning post, hailed him:

"Hold it, Cougar!"

The Crow Track owner stopped in the middle of the street and turned to face Lurt, Hank Blue and Joe Enders—two Cross Bar riders who seemed always to be siding Lurt whenever he wasn't alone—looked out of the saloon door at Cougar with expectant, slinky grins on their sun-cured faces. Passersby within hearing distance had, naturally, stopped curiously to see what sort of a shindig Lurt was about to stage now.

Lurt gibed loudly, "You like to dance so much, Cougar, why not do a little jig for us folks right here?"

"Ain't got my dancing boots on, Lurt," said Cougar, and started on his way again.

A bullet dimpled the dust close to his feet, and he stopped. The roar of the shot started teams and saddle horses to shying and pitching.

"Dance, you big-footed gazelle—or I'll blow your toes off!" Lurt's eyes were agleam with pure hell-making. He ripped two more ear-ringing shots into the dust, one of them singing between Cougar's lathy legs.

Cougar Jones stood motionless, shoulders squared to Lurt and his stare solid against the big noise of the Three Rivers range. "I'm easy-going, Lurt," he said, "but some things sure rile me plenty."

No dancing — no toad-hopping — just quiet soberness settling around, and grins suddenly forgotten. The fun was over before it started.

Georgia caught him as he was coming out of the saddle and gun shop. "Cougar, I saw it all from the dressmaker's window!" Suppressed excitement swayed her, and she was a little breathless. "Now you're getting some starch—I mean, you just stood there and didn't move a muscle. You didn't kick up a fit with your feet like some dude Easterner, or scoot down the street like a jack-rabbit—"

He grinned, then lifted his broad shoulders. "Want to ride back home with a hero?"

Her eyes lowered and, Cougar thought, she reacted somewhat guiltily. "I promised Lurt I'd go swim—er—picnicking with him," she said, but in the next breath

added, with the sweetest smile he'd ever seen coming along with it, "I just wish you'd have asked me first."

Cougar was pretty much pigeon-toed and feather-headed after that encounter with Georgia, and it was two days down the well before he discovered that he'd come out eight or ten more head short on his count, a task he'd taken on himself during these cow-thieving times. That one hurt, and no fooling. A few more like it and he'd be selling out at a loss.

Meditations, that's what a situation like this . . . No, by gum! You couldn't free-wheel a gal like Georgia McNary with a hung-up spread on your hands. Sand and vinegar was what he needed now. Like Georgia had said about rustlers, "It's make or break." Still, if her old man and the sheriff and Lurt Webb's father and the rest of them couldn't bust up them thieving devils—

Cougar night-drifted his range so steadily thereafter that he was half asleep most of the time. He got to palavering with his pony more than was good for a man, yet he dragged himself forth each time the sun slipped behind the far range of mountains.

Meanwhile Webb's Cross Bar grass had been relieved of a fair jag of beef, and feeling certain that his range would soon be visited again, Cougar stuck to the regimen of much saddle-forking and little bunk-snoring.

SUCH dogged determination was bound to be rewarded. Half-dormant with drowsiness he was drifting along a gnarly-brushed hogback when the night wind carried to him the faint bawling of cattle. Cougar bounced awake with a suddenness that startled his horse; he sat tense-muscled in saddle, keening the night like a wolf on the scent. Then, with a swift touch of spurs, he was abruptly racing over none too gentle terrain toward that restless stirring he could hear.

The strong smell of dust finally prompted him to slacken his headlong rush. A rumble of hooves rolled up to him. Presently he spied the coursing black bulk of the cattle being turned into the deeper denseness of a coulee. He halted his pony close to an oak grove.

By gum, he thought, they sure took a healthy chew out of me tonight. As best as he could make out through the engulfing darkness, at least twenty head were on the move. Why, damn their salty hides!

He caught the vague shapes of only two riders—one on the drag and one on this near flank. But two or ten, it made no difference. He wasn't about to give up twenty head of prime stock and kiss away to the four winds all his struggle and sweat. Moments later he had his glimpse of a third rider, on the far flank and toward the point.

That would be about it, he figured; three of them. He kicked around strategy and tactics then. He could ride out shooting and scatter his cows, at the same time scaring the rustlers off. Yet that wouldn't accomplish much over the long haul. By gosh, he'd trail them, smack-dab into their lair!

His preconceived notion of their course was justified when they picked up the main trace along the Old Easy River; yet not long later they made a southerly turn-off into a much traveled branch artery to ford Old Easy.

He trailed by scent and sound. He was surprised when he discovered he was being led over a tumbled terrain intersecting a piece of the Cross Bar and of the Big M. That section was, of course, soon left behind, and there was gradual ascent into the rough country where a few hard-scrabble ranchers eked out a sort of living.

The rustlers kept on the move until morning's damp darkness was sifted with a pre-dawn's dismal light. Cougar began getting short looksees at the gather, sensing that they were nearing their destination. A sharp angling into a coulee where the cattle were watered at a small stream, then hazed into a brush corral bore out his hunch.

Nearer to him than the corral, perched on a small slope of likely looking meadow grass, was a squat log cabin with a thin tendril of smoke rising from its chimney with the morning air. A buckskin and a white-socked black mount were on picket

in front of the cabin, and in the rear darkish green verdure indicated the source of spring water. In the cabin doorway stood a lank, tousle-haired customer rather negligently watching what was going on at the corral.

Cougar, entrenched a little deeper in a chaparral thicket, wasn't sure yet of his next maneuver. Quite frankly and naively he asked himself if he could handle four cow-thieves—perhaps more, if others were out of sight within the cabin. Maybe the sensible thing to do was to make tracks for Rainbow and the sheriff. Yet it seemed almost certain that by the time a posse could get back here his cows and the thieves would be long gone. Hell, he just couldn't afford to lose those cows, even if the law eventually did track down the rustlers!

So he lingered, gauging his own feelings and ability against the conviction slowly forming in his head. He had the gumption for it, all right, he decided at last with a certain self-wonder, but could he make it stick at a crucial moment? He'd never thrown down on *one* man, much less four or more. . . .

The three rustlers—it was still too mealy-lighted to see them clearly—rode up from the brush corral, dismounted and joined the fourth man inside the cabin. Cougar left his pony tied in the thicket and snaked his way through the brush to fetch up at the brush margin closest to the cabin's front. And there he waited, while the rising sun dissipated the clean dampness of night, and the rimrock above his head lifted as bright as a gleaming silver strip.

THE rustlers did not remain in the cabin for long. They filed out singly, the three who had actually done the night-raiding pausing beside their horses. The long-boned, mussy-haired man came out with a sleepy-eyed fellow who couldn't have had much more than eighteen winters on his shoulders. Neither was armed.

Cougar was close enough to see the bunch with clarity. His mouth had thinned down and his eyes had narrowed because of sudden, flashing anger. By the great horned toads, he'd never felt so mad!

Yet he stepped casually out of the brush, uncrimping his Colt, and, as though out for a morning session of his own particular brand of meditation, quartered the slope toward that hardcase bunch!

He caught the tail-end of speech from the lank gent's mouth. "—we'll have them brutes trailin' within the hour."

The sleepy-eyed kid was the first to spy Cougar. He blinked as though seeing an apparition, and whined, "Who the hell is that feller?"

There was a swiftly simultaneous turning and gawking by the other four, a slackness and bewilderment of countenances. The rustlers stood frozen as though turned suddenly to stone.

Cougar Jones stopped, spraddle-legged, and shouted in outrage, "Lurt Webb, you skulking coyote! Stealing off your neighbors—and off your own pa, too!"

Hank Blue and Joe Enders were as usual siding Lurt. It took but a brief time for that unholy trio to recover.

"Of all the loco dudes—" muttered Hank Blue.

A queer grin was on Lurt's darkly handsome face. "He's packing hardware, boys. A real curly wolf on the prowl." He took a long stride out from his horse, disdainfully amused. "Just what the hell you figure on doing, Mr. Jones?"

"I'm taking the lot of you into Rainbow."

"Huh?" snickered Lurt, a soft laugh bubbling and building in him. "Oh—yeah—yeah. We're going to Rainbow with Cougar, boys. He's caught us red-handed, and we've got to surrender. Ain't that right, Cougar? Come a mite closer, boy. Just a mite."

"The range a little far for you, Lurt?" Cougar inquired with his own touch of sarcasm.

"I told you, boys—a real curly wolf," derided Lurt, obviously enjoying this curious, unexpected incident to the utmost. "I just want to give you a better chance to down one of us, Cougar. But have your own way, boy. Just remember, you've got to thumb back the hammer on the big gun before she'll trigger lead.

Think you can remember that?"

"You won't come peaceably then?" queried Cougar, disheartened, his dead serious demeanor in contrast to the contemptuous smirking of the others incongruous.

Still grinning, but wickedly, Lurt slowly shook his head and took still another stride out from his horse. "You're a dead man, Cougar. No two ways about it." There was silence while his words lingered ominously in the air. He enticed finally, "Go to it, boy—draw! I'll even let you clear leather before I slap it."

That's gravy for me, Cougar thought grimly, and hopefully. There's a chance I can sizzle the three of them before—

In an eye-wink his Colt was out and bucking, his first shot smashing Lurt's hand as it gripped gun butt before dragging iron. On the tail of it Cougar's arm swung and his second shot slammed into Hank Blue's right shoulder before that night-rider could throw down to his aim, spilling him clean off his feet. Joe Enders could have put in his shot, but no quicker than Cougar could have returned the compliment, so with a flick of the wrist he simply tossed his weapon to the ground, staring wildly in bung-eyed disbelief. "A streak of greased lightning!"

"A regular catamount!" breathed the long gent standing with arms uplifted alongside the shaky-kneed kid who was far from sleepy now.

Hank Blue was squatted on the ground, hunched sideward holding his shot shoulder, and Lurt was cradling his hand.

COUGAR ambled forward. He felt sorry for Lurt and Hank Blue, but ordered sternly.

"Now the pack of you start my cows back to the Crow Track, then we're going to have that pow-wow in Rainbow with the sheriff. . . ."

Cougar Jones was outside his weather-drab shanty, just having completed a seance with that slick old Colt gun of his. The shot echoes were still ringing in his ears and he didn't get the sound of a horse and rider coming in.

"I heard you meditating again," a light-hearted voice said. "How does it feel to be a gun-fighting hero?"

Cougar shrugged. "It'll do till sundown," he answered laconically.

She laughed breezily. She was forking her pinto, her smile shining, her face glowing as she watched him. "Or are you just getting primed to go gunning again?"

He moved out toward her with a slow, purposeful stride. His head tilted in a studious way and his eyes gleamed enigmatically as he said roughly, "I'm gunning for *you*, sugar. Get off that painted cayuse!"

Georgia McNary's brows lifted with amused wonder. She swung out of saddle and stood waiting, a little puzzled, a little tense. Her breasts pressuring the gingham shirt-waist stirred excitedly.

Cougar's long arm snaked around her slender waist and he jerked her lithe body against his own with such force that a gusty breath was forced out of her. His lips came down on her silky, warm ones with an awkward and bruising insistence, her firm breasts snugging his chest driving him to an uninhibited ardor and wildness. For just a sweet, hot moment Georgia gave of her own aroused passions, but love's tenderness had a way of simmering them down and leaving them kitten-weak.

She murmured breathlessly, "Was that what you were meditating about just before I rode in?"

"Hunnh!" he grunted, like a council Indian.

She took a deep breath and suddenly wrenched herself free. She slapped him with such vigor that his face looked west instead of south.

He stumbled back crumpled, abject, completely flabbergasted, his fingers rubbing his stinging cheek.

"What . . . You—didn't you like it?"

"I loved it!" she whispered hotly, her eyes burning bright like those of a mischievous sprite. "I changed you into a fightin' man, and now I guess I'll have to show you how to make love. That slap was warning not to get so free and easy with crazy, reckless kisses—before we're married!"

DEAD MAN'S SECRET

By Edward Carr

Stevens saw the big Frenchman wipe his knife on his buckskins

WHEN he had skinned out the last carcass in the cache, Pete Stevens lifted his troubled eyes to the wooded draw beyond the thawing meadow. There in the lengthening shadows he could see Quebec getting the pack rigging in readiness and shoeing the horses for the trip back to Carroll. The young trapper belted his skinning knife, wondering for the thousandth futile time if Quebec was planning to kill him.

If murder was in the big Frenchman's mind, he would probably time it before morning. At dawn they were to start back to Carroll with their winter's catch. And there were far too many pelts for their four pack horses. Quebec had laughingly quipped that he would show Pete how to pack a horse. But Stevens was certain that at least one more animal would be needed. He suspected that it was his own mount that the Frenchman was counting on to pack out the excess skins.

He whipped rawhide thongs around the pelts, hoisted the bundle to his shoulder, picked up his Henry's rifle, and with his tall frame bent forward, circled to the draw by the line of trees around the meadow.

Despite his apprehension about the night that stretched ahead of him, Stevens was relieved that the long wait was over, that the months of tormenting guesswork were behind him. Before morning he

Pete Stevens was sure Quebec meant to kill him,

but was he sure enough to kill the Frenchman first?

would know if Quebec had killed Rusty McFee.

For three years Rusty had been Stevens' partner and close friend. The season before, when Stevens had ridden as a scout for General Miles, Rusty had teamed up with Quebec. The Frenchman had come back alone. The Sioux had lifted McFee's hair, so Quebec reported. It was a likely enough fate for a trapper in the Missouri country, except that Quebec got back with all Rusty's personal possessions, including his Sharpe's carbine and his belt gun, both of which the Sioux would lift as quickly as they would a man's hair. The money from all the pelts had gone into Quebec's pocket. It was enough to arouse a man's suspicions. So Stevens had gone out with the big Frenchman into the Judith Basin for fur—and for the secret of Rusty McFee's death.

STEVENS found Quebec now by a low fire mending pack straps. As the Frenchman looked up, the moroseness drained out of his face and his mouth opened in the black tangle of his beard, red as a cut. His teeth showed in a grin that contrasted strangely to the brooding in his face of a moment before.

"*Mon ami,*" he cried with delight. "Finished, *non*?"

Stevens nodded and let the skins fall off his shoulder. Does a man who plans murder greet you with such exuberant friendliness? Or is murder a game of masks? The young trapper glanced at the quarter of antelope roasting over the fire.

"The cold she makes them like silk," the Frenchman said, appraising the pelts as he grinned his pleasure. Then his bulging eyes glazed over with that far-off look that Stevens had seen with increasing frequency of late. Quebec looked down the ravine to the darkening skyline above the cedar ridges to the east.

"*Certainement,* I will wear silk when I go back to Quebec."

Stevens watched the excitement in the man's bony face, the burning desire in his bulbous eyes, the determined jut of the lantern jaw. Quebec was always like this when he talked about going back in style to Quebec. His voice would grow throaty with emotion as he relived being cuffed about as an orphan waif in the back kitchen of Chimbaud's restaurant. Then the hurt, rumbling voice would rise shrill as he would preview his re-entry into Chimbaud's as a man of property. When it ended, he would either cry or beat his big hands together in excited anticipation. This time he beat a knuckled fist in the palm of his other hand.

"*Mon ami,* the winter gone almost. *Enfin.* I go back to Quebec." He looked off to the east, then glanced at Stevens. Morosenes passed over the bearded face like a dark shadow.

Suddenly he threw back his head and laughed with that strained shrillness that to Stevens always rang hollow. But how could he really judge if a laugh was false? Any more than he could read a man's mind to know if he was planning to kill him? How could he see down into the dark depths of a man's mind to make out the black memories of murder? For months now he had tried to read the thoughts behind that bearded face—and vainly.

"Yes, the long nights are over," Stevens agreed belatedly with double meaning and balanced his rifle against a tree. His fingers instictively brushed over the butt of his belt gun.

Vigilantly the young trapper watched Quebec turn to the fire, crouch down, swing the spitted antelope on the roasting stick from over the coals. He sliced off a browned rump steak, skewered it on his knife, and pushed out the succulent piece to Stevens.

The young trapper took the steak in his fingers thoughtfully. Does the man who plans to kill you give you the choicest cut on the quarter? Or is Quebec's grin another mask to screen his real intentions? Stevens was about to raise the steak to his mouth when he saw Quebec swipe his knife on his buckskins behind him. Covertly the Frenchman turned the blade and swiped it behind him again.

The movement surprised Stevens. The slovenly Quebec wiping his knife between cuts of meat? Then Stevens saw that Que-

bec was eying him. The lobster eyes of the man were staring at him. To play for time to think, Stevens reached to his belt and removed the rawhide sack of dried cherries he had carried with him as a tidbit for the noon meal. His fingers fumbled at the opening. He kept glancing at Quebec.

The Frenchman hacked off a piece of meat from the shank. Why did he take the charred leg meat when there were choice cuts at the other end of the quarter? Stevens' mind, hair-triggered by suspicion, raced madly for an answer. Had Quebec poured over the upper end of the quarter a vial of crystalline strychnine just as they poisoned down the frozen carcasses of buffalo as deadly bait for wolves? For a moment Stevens envisioned the convulsion of a wolf threshing to its death in the snow.

QUEBEC kept glancing at him sharply. Could this ugly suspicion have basis or was it a mirage of his overwrought mind? He looked at the big Frenchman pushing meat into his mouth. His mind kept racing up blind alleys. He couldn't bring the meat to his lips. Yet it would be unnatural if he didn't eat it. And if he did, it might be the end of him and his resolve to uncover the true facts in the death of his friend.

"Getting some water," he said. The eyes watching him seemed to bulge more. Still facing Quebec, Stevens sank his teeth into the meat, tore off a bite and went off working his jaws as though he were chewing the steak.

Careful not to swallow his saliva, he walked as casually as he could to the stream. He dropped to his knees, spat the unchewed meat into his hand, rammed it and the rest of the steak up under the ice ledge that lined the creek bank. He lowered himself and rinsed his mouth again and again. He let the icy water flush his mouth until his gums were numb. He thought he tasted the bitterness of strychnine—or was he just imagining it?

Back at the fire, he took his skinning knife from his belt and hacked a piece of meat from the charred shank. He caught the protruding eyes watching his movements. If murder is an affair of masks, he thought, not getting murdered is equally an affair of masks.

"When you get back to Quebec, they will make you chef in Chimbaud's," he said to the Frenchman, and forced himself to laugh. The affair of masks, making talk that was at odds with the suspicions in his mind sickened him.

To get away, he said, "I'll water the horses."

He walked down to the coulee in which the horses were hobbled. His mind jumped from the suspicion that Quebec had tried to poison him to the thought that he had poisoned his own mind with baseless suspicions. He had seen wolves knot up in convulsions within twenty-five minutes of eating a poisoned carcass. He started back.

He said to Quebec, "I'm turning in. Running his hand over his stomach, he made a grimace of pain and turned away. The questioning way the man's eyes had stared at him.

Stevens went over to the twin-trunked aspen tree and bedded down in the prepared matting of juniper shrubs. He lay his Henry's rifle inside his large hareskin robe and put his revolver under his hand. He lay facing the old war house they had patched with buffalo hides and used for shelter. Only a week ago, fearful that Quebec could reach over and finish him with his knife as he slept, Stevens had moved out of the war house on the pretext that outside he could have a better chance listening for Piegans or Crows or Sioux who were prematurely out of their winter lodges.

Motionless under the warm hareskin robe, out of the slit of an eye he watched the movements of Quebec by the conical war house, testing the strength of the pack straps and occasionally making one tighter. It seemed to the young trapper that Quebec faced toward him more than his work called for. Sometimes the man, seeming to forget the rawhide straps in his hand, bent forward and stared his way.

Though Stevens grew cramped, he hardly shifted a muscle. If he had been poisoned, he would play the part—less the convulsions. He stilled his breathing by

drawing his breath in short puffs from the top of his lungs. Then he closed the slit of his one eye and depended on his ears to warn him.

The steel of his revolver cold under his hand, his mind cold under the grip of tormenting suspicions, Stevens lay rigid, tense, his nerves raw. Weary with the endless guessing in a nightmare that had no answers, he lay and pondered his next move.

In time the shuffling outside the war house ceased and Stevens could hear the muffled sounds of Quebec bedding down inside. The young trapper centered all his consciousness in the thin membranes of his ears, sifting the familiar pattern of night sounds for warnings—the prolonged howling of a wolf and the sound in a different key as a second wolf picked it up, the rustle close by of a mouse or a ground squirrel on the crusted snow, the distant *ki-hi-ing* of a coyote, the stamping of a horse down the draw.

IT MIGHT have been two hours, maybe three, before Stevens heard the sound he was waiting for—the crust of snow by the war house breaking under a man's weight. His finger nudged inside the trigger guard of his revolver. The cautious padding sound went the other way—down the draw to the horses. It wasn't like Quebec to bestir himself without the horses themselves giving some warning.

Stevens couldn't pick up the sound of steps coming back. He eased one eye open a slit. He could see nothing unusual in the pattern of shadows. With great effort he forced himself to lie still.

Close behind him he heard the crunch of snow. The sound jabbed him like a needle. He bolted up in the hareskin robe to his knees and whirled around. The shadowed figure of a man jumped back with the same alarmed abruptness.

Without thought Stevens fired—once, twice. The ravine echoed with the blast of the shots. Stevens saw Quebec staggering in the snow with his hands pressed against his stomach. Then the big Frenchman's knees buckled and he tilted over backward in a gesture of grotesque tiredness.

Stevens ran to where the man had fallen. He looked down into the pain-twisted lines of the face fading into the total unconcern of death. He knelt and put his hand above the dark blob of blood seeping through the buckskin shirt. The heart did not beat.

The young trapper got to his feet and turned his head away from the bearded face with its gaping mouth—the man he had shot without a thought. He saw Quebec's revolver still in his belt. If the man had meant to kill him, he certainly didn't have a weapon ready. With growing horror Stevens told himself that he had shot the man simply because he had jumped back with such unexpected abruptness. He, too, had bolted when he heard the noise to his rear. Do you kill a man because he makes an abrupt move?

Sickened, Stevens turned away. If he couldn't read the intentions of the trapper when he was alive then the mind of the dead man in the snow was now closed to him forever. Instead of finding out if his friend Rusty McFee had been murdered, Stevens himself had ended up a murderer. Now he would have to go back to the settlements with a dead partner to account for. He thought feverishly of what he would say, as though Easterbrook, the factor at Carroll, were already asking him. No lie would come to him. There were only the facts as inescapable as the hulk of the man who lay dead in the snow.

He knelt again and put his hand over Quebec's heart. There was no movement in the hard chest. He wanted to get away from the bleeding hulk in the snow, away from the ravine, away from everything that would remind him. In deep depression Stevens knew that the brand of murderer, burnt deep into his consciousness, would never wear off.

The ground was too hard for him to dig a grave. Stevens dragged the body to a rock outcropping along the side of the ravine. He pried loose rocks from the ground and ice and piled them over the body of the dead man.

One shadow and then another drifted up behind Stevens in the ravine. He saw the yellow-green eyes of the wolves burn-

ing in the darkness and the animals, on the scent of blood, rumped down in the snow and watched him cover up the man he had killed. When he had finished he threw a stone and then another at the line of burning eyes.

The gray shadows shifted and formed farther back. Stevens reloaded his revolver and put it back in his belt. With his rifle ready he started toward the wolves. They broke as he came near and slunk off to the flanks past him toward the smell of the blood from the rock pile.

Deciding not to wait for morning, Stevens loaded up only half the wolf pelts. He meant to take only what was rightly his. He thought of leaving Quebec's horses, but he doubted if they could fare for themselves with the last grip of winter still on the country.

WHEN he had the horses ready, he went down to the creek to fill his water flask. He knelt down at the spot where he had buried the suspect meat, his mind tormenting him with reproaches. Just because a man wipes his knife or cuts a piece of meat from the shank end of a quarter of antelope doesn't mean he is poisoning you.

The scratching sound of paws on rock made Stevens start. He dropped the water horn, grabbed under the ice ledge for the meat he had hidden, took the meat in one hand and his rifle in the other and ran up the ravine.

He studied the wolves milling around the rocks. He threw the meat to a hulking big gray. Two dark shadows made a play for the meat and closed in, snarling on the gray. As the big gray drove them off, a cream-colored buffalo wolf darted in, snatched the meat, and gulped the piece down whole.

Fearful that the big gray would go for the tawny wolf, Stevens brought his rifle to his shoulder, but the big gray turned away and went back to pawing at the rocks. Stevens kept his eyes fastened on the cream-colored wolf that in minutes would tell him if Quebec had poisoned the meat.

Once he thought of leaving so that if the tawny wolf did not cramp up and thresh in the snow, he would at least have a doubt that Quebec had tried to take his life.

One by one the wolves broke away and faded in the shadows down the ravine. When the tawny wolf that had taken the antelope steak started trotting down the ravine, Stevens ran after it. Loping leisurely across the ice-crusted snow of the meadow, the wolf made for the wooded hill beyond. Stevens ran hard after the animal, but time after time he broke through the snow crust, lost his balance, and fell back. When he lost sight of the wolf, it was trotting through the aspen stand on the top of the hill.

Stevens thought of turning back, but when he stopped he couldn't bring himself to give in to the despair that lay inside him like a cold stone. He trudged up the hill, through the aspen copse where he had seen the wolf silhouette itself on the skyline. He went down the hill and across the flat beyond.

Then he saw it—the shadow it cast in the snow to the right. He ran.

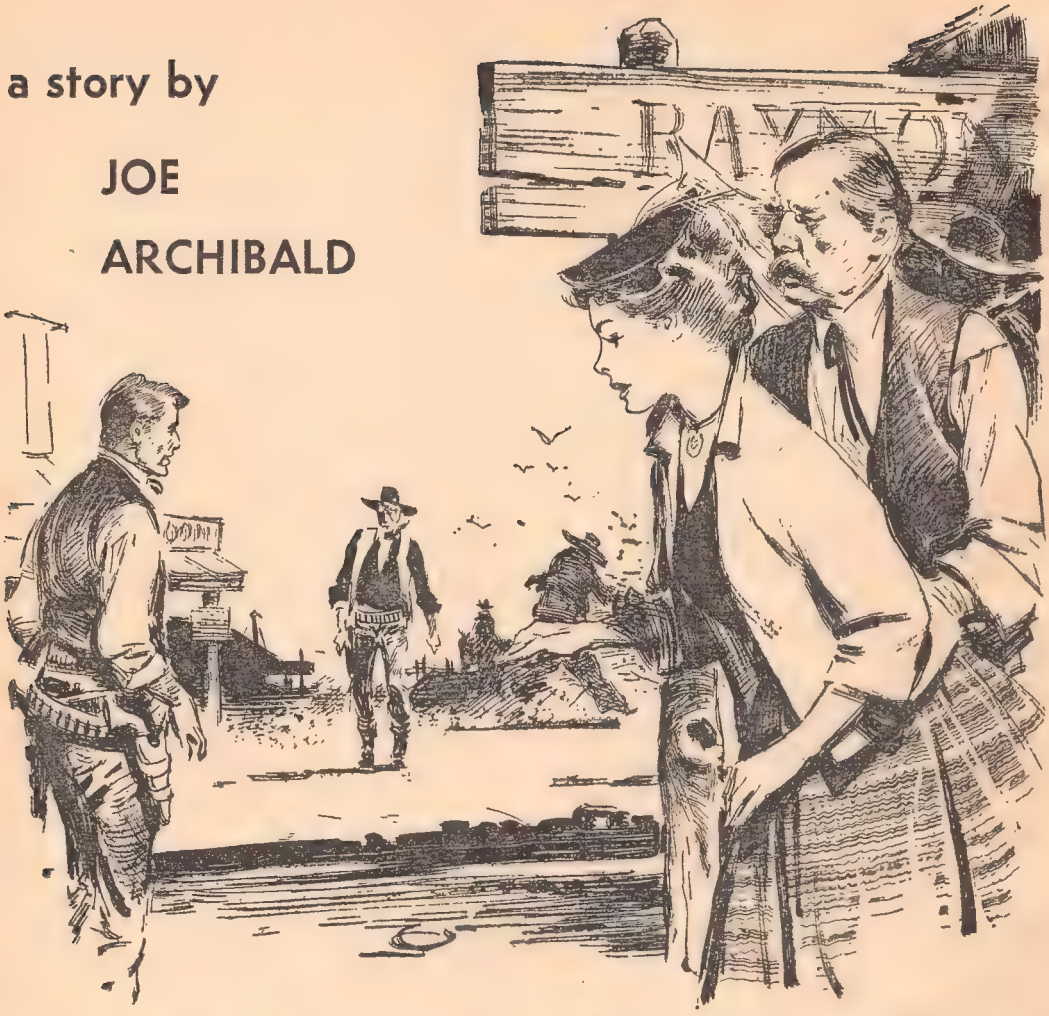
The wolf was rigid, the legs extended in its last paroxysm of convulsion, the mouth twitched back over the bared fangs. It was like any one of the hundreds of other wolf carcasses dead from strychnine.

Stevens gazed down at the tawny animal in the snow and he could feel the tension drain out of his body. For the first time since he had heard of the death of Rusty McFee, he felt a certain sense of peace.

Wearily he knelt in the snow beside the wolf and ran his fingers slowly through the silken fur as a gesture of gratitude to the animal that had read for him at last the dark mind of Quebec.

a story by

JOE ARCHIBALD



GUNMAN, Run No More

No one knew that Will Bassick had once been the notorious Ray McQueen, but now, for Nora, he must tip his hand

WILL BASSICK was driving the last nail in a shoe he had fitted to a Box S claybank's front foot when its rider, Sam Varney, came in and sat down on the rim of the water butt.

"I just come from the Longhorn, Will," the puncher said. "It's him all right."

Bassick let the claybank's foot down and stared bleakly at Varney. The blacksmith was a man close to forty, with traces of silver at his temples and small crows' tracks around his eyes. His hands as he wiped them on the leather apron were unusually long-fingered for the trade he had adopted, and he could not be considered, save for his broad shoulders, a powerfully built man.

"Sid Rome," the blacksmith said, and tossed his hammer away. "With hundreds of towns spread around, he had to come to Hardin." He built himself a smoke, touched it off and asked, "The sheriff know, Sam?"

Varney laughed deep in his throat. "If he does, Will, he went fishing in a hurry, and he'll take his time getting back."

"You can't blame Hillick so much," Bassick said. "Times have changed. The days when all lawmen had to be Wyatt Earps are gone. The law breaking we've had to contend with the past few years didn't call for a man of higher caliber than Chet Hillick. Besides, he's got a wife and three kids."

"I guess you're right," Varney said. "How much do I owe you, Will?"

WHEN the puncher had ridden away, Will Bassick stood in the doorway, conscious of an old excitement that ran along his nerves, and the shutters of his memory opened and brought a sharp brightness to his slate-gray eyes. Sid Rome was a throwback from turbulent days Will was remembering, but the smith knew that this gunslinger would never have progressed beyond the two-bit stage had he lived in that distant past. His lack of competition now made him big. Few men wore gunbelts these days.

There was an urge in Will Bassick he had to fight down as he stared out into the gathering dusk and, thinking of a woman, his blood cooled. For almost three years he had dreamed of her ending his loneliness, but had lacked the courage to bring the dream to reality. Circumstances were piled against him; fifteen years ago a badman had shot her husband down.

Bassick was preparing to close up when a gunshot came from across the wide street, followed by a woman's shrill scream. He ran out to the hardpan and saw people scattering from in front of Ebbert's General Dry Goods Store.

Mary Winton worked there. He ran across the street, throwing caution away, and Sid Rome came out of the store as he jumped to the planked walk. The gunslinger stopped short and spread his long legs wide, a wicked and insolent grin warping his bony face.

"Hold on, mister!" Rome said coldly, his hungry, slim gunhand close to his low-hanging holster. "Was just having a little fun!"

"Shooting up a dry goods store!" Will said tauntingly. "You're a real curly wolf, you are, Rome!"

"Should carry a gun to back up that big mouth, old man!" the gunman said. He cuffed his flat-crowned hat back over his mop of sandy hair and shouldered past Bassick. "Keep out of my way or I'll forget you don't pack a gun."

Will curbed a wild temptation to jump Rome. Instead, he set his lips tight and walked into the store. Ebbett was handing Mary a glass of water. She sat on a stool behind the counter, her brown eyes filled with fright and resentment.

"He put his hands on her, the dirty polecat," Ebbett said. "I made a move to stop him and he put a bullet close to my head. Smashed up some china plates. Said he'd see her later. You seen Sheriff Hillick?"

"Would there be much use?" Will Bassick asked without rancor. "There's not a man in town who could stand up to Sid R—" He let the rest of the name hang and went around the counter. "Better get on home," he said. "I'll walk there with you."

Mary looked up at him, her eyes thanking him. They were so much like her mother's, Will thought. She had the same small full-lipped mouth as her mother, Nora, too, but much lighter hair. He knew there was a young puncher out on the Pothook to whom Mary was partial.

Out on the walk he said, "I wouldn't let that young Dollitt know, Mary. He might be a frisky knight in armor riding a sorrel bronc, but a dead cinch for a man like Rome."

"There's no one to stop that gunman, Will?" the girl asked fearfully.

"Right now I can't think of a jasper who would want to try," Will said, sorely regretting what time can do to a man.

They moved through the gathering dark

to a big frame house at the southern end of the town where Nora Winton rented out rooms. She was sitting on the porch peeling potatoes when Will swung the gate open, and quickly set the pan down and got out of her chair.

"You're home early, Mary," she said, her eyes questioning Will's being with her.

"Something happened, Mother. A man—"

"Go on in the house," Will said gently, and leaned against the porch railing. When the front door closed, Nora Winton said, "What did she mean, Will?"

HE LOOKED at her, realizing that what he was going to say would bring back old and bitter memories. She was still a beautiful woman, with a single streak of white tracing a path through her dark hair. She as much taller than her daughter, and her figure was one many younger women would envy.

"Sid Rome's in town," Will said. "He tried to—get too friendly with Mary in the dry goods store."

"Rome?" Nora Winton asked. "Then there really is such a man, Will? I—I didn't think he was real somehow, and that the things they say he's done were just talk." Fear clouded her eyes and Will Bassick nearly summoned up the nerve to reach out and take her in his arms.

"The beast!" she said suddenly. "I thought all animals like him had been destroyed."

He felt her words burn into him deep and stir the dead ashes of the past, and he took his eyes away from her and stared at the floor. "Always has been this way, Nora. They say that somewhere you'll find animals that are supposed to be extinct. Sid is one of them."

"What will they do about it, Will?"

He shook his head. "His gun makes him ten foot taller than any of us, Nora. We'll have to take time to think this thing out."

"And before you do, there will most likely be people killed. And decent girls like Mary—"

"I promise you," Will said, "he won't bother her again."

"Will," she said, a small laugh escaping her throat. "You'll fight him with a blacksmith's hammer? What can you do against a sixgun?"

"I don't know, Nora," he said a little angrily. "I just don't know." He tipped his hat and abruptly left her.

She called, "Will, I didn't mean to—" but he slammed the gate shut behind him and walked back into the main street.

Hardin felt the full impact of Rome's presence when the street lamps were lit. The gunman had his evening meal at Layne's chophouse, and made no effort to pay. At the Longhorn he had many drinks and shattered the mirror behind the bar when the man on duty insisted that he put some money down. Chet Hillick made the best stand he could when he caught up with Rome in front of the hotel.

"Get out of town, Sid!" Hillick ordered, but kept his hand away from his gun.

Rome laughed in Hillick's face. "I aim to stay awhile, Sheriff. I've seen something that pleases me, and I aim to have it."

Will Bassick sat in front of the saddleshop with four Box S punchers and knew somehow that the good days here were near an end. He watched Sheriff Hillick turn and walk back down the street, stop, and look back at the hotel, and knew the turmoil that was in the lawman. There was some within himself, and it kept building as the hours went by. . . .

The blacksmith woke early the next morning, and looked out at the bright sun from the window of his room over the hardware store. It was Sunday and the main street was deserted. He dressed slowly, and washed, then sat in an old chair and stared at a closet door. He ran his hands over the knees of his faded levis and wished those long fingers were fifteen years younger, and that his eyes were just a little sharper. Finally he sucked his breath in, got up and walked to the closet and flung the door open. He reached in behind some clothes that were hanging there and took down a gun-belt and a pair of sixguns. His legs trembled under him when he saw the little brass studs in the

gun-belt that formed the initials, R. M. And once more he stood in a darkened street at sundown facing a man who had ridden far to kill him.

BASSICK shook the old vision out of mind and strapped on the gun-belt, but he knew he could not dismiss a wonderment at the way trails crossed. When he had ridden into Hardin nearly three years ago and asked a stableman where there was a good place to sleep, the answer had nearly put him up to the saddle again. "Try Nora Winton's. Might have a spare room, friend."

The blacksmith pulled on an old cloth coat, buttoned it around him, and left his room. He crossed the street to the stable and saddled his horse, and was riding out of Hardin before the pots and pans began to clatter in Layne's chophouse. Sid Rome, he felt sure, was still in his bed.

Deep in the hills, Will Bassick got out of saddle and removed his coat. He picked himself a target, a knothole in an old oak tree fifty yards away. He turned slightly to the left, then quickly spun the other way, drawing his gun from holster. The kick of the .45 in his hand felt strange, and the blast of it seemed to echo and echo through the hills. He walked over to the tree, poked his finger into the hole the bullet had made an inch to the left of the target, and he shook his head. Then he went back and began shooting again. His fifth and sixth tries had to hit the mark. He shoved the Colt back into holster and let the smell of gunsmoke creep up into his nose.

The fossil of an extinct creature, Will thought as he gazed out over the rugged country. And he began remembering again. He was back in Kansas, working for Lafe Fenniman who owned the Rolling W, and he was riding through that fog-ridden night, with six other punchers looking for a bunch of stolen cattle. They ran into three riders driving the stock out of a box canyon at the edge of the badlands, and two of the rustlers had lost no time in getting into the brush. Will Bassick had ridden the other to an old line shack and had holed him in, and when the man had come out shooting, had dropped him in his tracks. Turning the man over, he had recognized him as the foreman of a small outfit using the Lazy J brand.

In those days, Will recalled, they'd had a sheriff in the town who was partial to the small ranchers, and the majority of the people in the county resented a man like Fenniman getting too big. The law had contended that the big rancher could not establish sufficient proof that the Lazy J riders threw wide loops, and had demanded that one Ray McQueen, gunslinger, get out of the country. At the inquiry, Dan Winton, owner of the Lazy J, had said to McQueen, "You're not getting off that easy, killer. You know Paulsen had no chance against you, and it was murder. He was my best friend."

Will Bassick fingered the little brass studs on his gun-belt, and felt deep regret. He had been a wild cuss in those days and admitted that he never should have stopped overnight in the border town of Miles Gap, eleven miles out of Rolling W territory. He had come out of the restaurant to find Winton waiting for him in the street. It had been kill or be killed, and Ray McQueen had figured he was too young to die. Riding out of Miles Gap, Ray McQueen had not known that Winton's wife was expecting a child.

The blacksmith of Hardin drew the six-gun from holster, weighed it in his hand, and wished he had been born a timid man with a store clerk's ambition. "Gunman!" they had whispered when he had ridden out of Miles Gap, and for years afterward in ever changing environments, he had been goaded into proving it. Many men he had never heard of, much less having seen, were supposed to have died at his hand. And then one day he had found escape. He had tied his horse to the rail in front of a saloon in a town deep in Montana when a wild bunch rode in and tried to rob the bank. One of the riders had had his horse shot out from under him and had taken Ray McQueen's sorrel. An hour later the posse shot him off the bronc and tumbled him into a deep and swiftly running river. That was the night Will Bass-

ick was born, and he had lost no time in getting out of the town.

THE blacksmith, hunkered down near a windfall, recalled the newspaper he had read in a town thirty miles south of the scene of the holdup. It had reported the death of the gunman, Ray McQueen. Belongings in the saddle-bags found on the sorrel had been proof enough. Will Bassick, no longer wearing a mustache, and wearing his dark hair long, worked for a few cattle outfits for the next few years, learned the blacksmith's trade while at one of these, then finally made his way to Hardin to go in business for himself.

It was the only happy place he had ever known, Will thought, resentment toward Sid Rome building slowly into hate. He got up quickly, threw a shot at the oak tree, then another. It had suddenly turned into the shape of the sneering gunman who had nearly shoved him off the walk. He sucked his breath in deep, holstered the gun and walked slowly toward his horse. He rode up an old cow trail to a stand of timber and on its far side dropped down a cedar-tufted ridge to a narrow bench where Pothook cattle grazed. Here he met young Tim Dollitt and two other punchers.

"A blacksmith," Dollitt said grinning. "I've said all along you sit a horse like a real string man, Will." His mood quickly changed, and his dark eyes flashed. "I heard about Rome."

Will Bassick said, "Don't tangle with him, son, or you'll be dead. We'll work it out some way."

"There's only one way," Dollitt said stiffly, his strong and stubborn chin set hard. "I can't let him get away with it, Will."

"To hell with your pride and heroics," the smith said. "What use has Mary Winton for a corpse?"

A Pothook puncher nodded. "He's plumb right, Tim. Nobody expects you to stand up against a killer."

The youngster dropped his eyes and stared at the saddle-horn for a long moment, then abruptly swung his roan around and rode across the bench.

"He's a hot head, Will," a rider said. "Don't be too sure he won't make a damn fool try."

The smith's hand dropped heavily against the skirt of his coat and suddenly he realized he still wore his guns. A mile away he unbuckled the gun-belt, stashed it in the hollow of a dead tree, and was thankful the Pothook punchers had not noticed he had been wearing it. When he rode into Hardin the townspeople were coming from Sunday meeting. Sid Rome was standing in front of the Longhorn, his hat brim pulled low over his eyes. When Bassick got down from his horse he saw the gunman tip his hat to two women who went by, and Sid must have spoken to them for they quickened their pace. And suddenly the smith realized that those two women were Nora and Mary Winton. Their church going clothes had fooled him for a moment, or else his eyes were failing him, a thought that put a cold lump in his chest.

He hurried across the street and heard Rome say, "There's a dance Wednesday night, kid. I'll be going with you."

"Rome!" Bassick yelled, just as Nora Winton suddenly stooped down and picked up a clod of dry mud. She whirled and flung it full into the gunman's grinning face. "You dirty dog!" she said. "You dirty, filthy beast!"

Sid Rome wiped dirt from his face, spat some out of his mouth. His eyes were blazing. "You'll be the sorriest woman who ever lived!" he said, and swung his face toward the blacksmith. "Keep out of this, old man, or I'll blow you in half."

"For now, Sid," Bassick said, and hurried after the Wintons.

"Will," Mrs. Winton said despairingly. "What are we to do?"

"I need a little time to think," he told her, and walked with them to the house at the edge of town. He did not tell Mary he had seen Tim Dollitt or that the puncher knew what had happened. When he got back to his room he took time to consider fully. If he got himself killed he would have accomplished nothing, and if he was lucky enough to knock Sid Rome down, it meant saddling up and leaving

Hardin. Take your choice, he told himself. Take six or a half-dozen. He had lived the better part of his life before he had found the one woman he could honestly say he loved, and he had reason to believe she thought more than kindly of him. Now, it was certain, a dream was over.

AT THREE o'clock the next afternoon, Will Bassick made up his mind. He went over to Judge Rush's office and found the legal mind busily assembling a stack of papers on his desk. The judge looked up at him through his heavy-lensed eyeglasses and scowled. "You see I'm busy, Will. What's on your mind?"

"Same as is on most everybody else's," the blacksmith said. "That gunfighter, Judge. I want you to call Chet Hillick here and ask him to resign. Then I want you to swear me in as acting sheriff until one can be elected legal."

The fat scholarly man fell back in his old swivel chair. "You serious, Will? Whoever said you could use a gun?"

"Figure I can handle one as good as Chet," Will said. "And I haven't got three kids, Judge."

"I see," the man said at length. "All right, Will, I'll see Hillick."

An hour later the judge sent a man over to the blacksmith shop to get Will Bassick. When Will walked into the office, Chet Hillick sat near the big desk. He no longer wore the star.

"You're a fool, Will," he said.

"Wouldn't be the first time, Chet," the smith said, and a few minutes later he had been sworn in.

He wore the badge of office when he went back to his forge. After finishing the job of putting a new iron rim on the wheel of a shacker's wagon, he went over to the sheriff's office and looked through a bunch of reward dodgers. He finally came upon one he was looking for. It advised the public at large that fifteen hundred dollars would be paid for the man or men who brought Sid Rome into a certain jurisdiction not too far away, dead or alive. He folded the paper and crammed it into his pocket.

When he came out to the street there was light still burning in Rush's office and he hurried across the street and up a flight of stairs.

"Change your mind, Will?" the judge asked irritably.

"Want you to make a will out," Will Bassick said. "I've got nearly two thousand dollars in the Hardin bank, and there's fifteen hundred dollars on Rome's head. If I live Nora Winton will have the money I saved. I sure owe it to her. If I get killed, she'll have more."

"Lot of us have wondered why you never asked her, Will," the judge said. "What in the name of Tophet have you got in your mind?"

"Too much, maybe," the smith said. "Well, let's draw it up, you old Hereford."

The legal business attended to, Will Bassick left the office and made his way to the Longhorn.

He found Sid Rome there, sitting at a table with a pair of case-hardened punchers. More than a dozen other men were pressed against the bar. Sid Rome lifted himself out of his chair and braced himself against the table-top with the heels of his hands.

"Well, I'm a two-headed calf, if they didn't make a new sheriff! Old man, they sure scraped the bottom of the barrel in this town. A no-gun sheriff at that! At least the other yellowback had the guts to wear a gun."

"I'll give you until sundown tomorrow to leave town, Rome," Will Bassick said quietly.

The gunslinger's mouth snapped open. He started to l a u g h, then suddenly straightened his hard features. "And if I don't, old man?"

"Just be here, Rome," the smith said. "You will find out."

He turned and walked out of the Longhorn, crossed over to the sheriff's office and eased himself to a chair on the porch. His eyes were fixed on the road that dropped off a ridge behind the town and wound in to Hardin's main street. He was watching for a sign of Tim Dollitt's roan when Nora Winton came around the corner of the frame building and stepped up to the porch.

NORA WINTON said in a soft, scared voice, "Will, I wouldn't believe it. Why did you put that badge on?"

"There's a job has to be done and I want it legal," the blacksmith said. "At least, this time, Nora." He kept staring out into the street, trembling at her nearness.

"You have no more chance than Hillick had," she said.

"Chet has folk depending on him, Nora."

"Will, you're a strange man. If you could only see the nose in front of your face, perhaps you'd have some. I mean—"

"Tell Mary not to worry about the dance, Nora," Will said, his blood warming at the inference that had been in her words. It was just possible that all he had to do was reach out now and she would not back up a single step, but tomorrow night he would be a different man, one that she must have wished dead a thousand times.

"Will," she pleaded, "you've never worn a gun. You can't just let yourself be shot down. Why couldn't a bunch of men ride this animal down?"

"They could, Nora," Will Bassick said. "But some would die. I have to do it my way."

She kept standing there, and seemed to be waiting for a certain word or sign. He set his teeth tight together and glued his eyes to the road that came down off the bluff, fighting off a hunger that had been a part of him for so long a time.

"All right, Will," Nora said, her voice barely audible, and left him.

Three Pothook riders came by and he called out, "Dollitt leave the ranch?"

A man rode over and leaned out of his saddle. "He figures to settle with Rome at the dance, Will. No talking it out of the jughead. Say, is that the sheriff's star you're wearing?"

"It's not a sachet bag," the blacksmith snapped back, and got out of the chair. "Keep away from that gunfighter."

At three o'clock the next afternoon, Will Bassick finished shaping a red-hot shoe on the anvil, and threw the tongs and hammer aside. He took off his apron and hung it on a peg on the wall, and stood looking at it for a few moments. He was aware of the tension gripping the town, its aura of dread expectancy. He washed his face and hands in an old tin basin, toweled himself off, then started slowly across the street to the livery stable.

Sid Rome's hoarse voice drifted over from in front of the Longhorn. "Five dollars he won't ever come back. Better ride fast, old man!"

When he saddled his bronc and led it out into the street, he was aware that everybody had either stopped stock still or slowed their gait and were staring at him. He climbed to the rig and rode slowly out of town and up toward the bluff.

Out in the hills he found the gun-belt where he had left it, strapped it on, and leaned against the old dead tree and weighed his chances against Sid Rome. Compared to the old gunslingers he had known, Rome was something of a tinhorn. But Sid had an insatiable urge to kill, and he was young and sharp-eyed. Those assets, Bassick hoped, might well have spawned a liability in the gunman. Overconfidence. He swung to saddle and rode toward a stretch of timber. Deep in the forest where wide beams of sun-light penetrated, he dismounted and proceeded to blaze away with his sixgun. He kept drawing and firing, and reloading, and finally shook his head a little dubiously. He had one thing left, he thought, as he flexed his long fingers—the name of Ray McQueen.

Will Bassick stretched himself out on the moss and pine spills of the forest, and killed another hour. When he rode into Hardin, the sun was low, and there was little room left at the tie-rails. A steady racket came out of the Longhorn until he came abreast of it. Then it quickly thinned, along with the hum of talk along the walks. The violence that was soon to take place was legend to all but a handful of people in the town, and even the women, Will noticed, reluctantly gave ground as they were ordered under cover.

THE stillness was profound when he got off his horse at the stable, and the sounds of his boots in the dust when he

crossed the wide street sounded like the beat of a war drum. A hoarse voice said, "He's wearing two guns!"

Four punchers, back-tracking into the Longhorn, stared wonderingly at the blacksmith as he stopped ten feet from the planked walk, and Bassick heard a woman cry out his name. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Nora Winton try to break loose from two men in the doorway of the notion store a block from the Longhorn.

She was crying, "Will, stop! Someone please stop him!"

Will Bassick called out, "Is Sid Rome in there?"

The gunfighter came through the batwings, a wicked grin on his face. It faded quickly when he came to the edge of the walk, and Bassick closely watched the changing light in the beady eyes. He saw doubt there for a moment, then the gunfighter laughed.

"Two guns, old man! What kind of a bluff is this?"

"I told you to get out of town, Sid," the acting sheriff said. "You've got two minutes."

A sudden gust of wind blew a newspaper out of the street and wrapped it around a post in front of the Longhorn. In the deadly quiet it sounded like the crackle of a forest fire. Will Bassick moved backward and slightly to his right.

Sid Rome laughed. He came off the walk, and angled to his left as he moved down the street, He stopped and swung around to face the man wearing the star.

"It's you that's leavin' town, old man! In a wagon."

The past rolled in and over Will Bassick. Some of his years seemed to fall away from him, and once more he felt the old excitement. "All right, Sid! Ray McQueen is ready!"

Rome struck for his gun, his eyes widening with shock, and Will Bassick knew he had beaten the gunfighter the instant the fellow's sixgun cleared the holster. The roar of the .45 made his own eyes blink, and Rome was driven back half a dozen steps. He broke in the middle, his eyes lifting to look at Will Bassick as he started to fall. The fear of death and utter disbelief shone in his face for a moment, then he pitched forward into the dust, his twitching fingers close to his cold sixgun.

Will Bassick unpinned his star as men poured out of the doorways. He walked slowly toward the prone figure of Sid Rome and stood staring down at it. Women laughed hysterically, and the excited voices of men filled the town. The blacksmith suddenly headed toward the walk, unbuckling his gun-belt, and when he dropped the guns to the planks, the first face he saw was that of Nora Winton. Sid Rome's face, he thought bitterly, had registered less of a shock.

He met her glance for a long half-minute, then said, "It is done," and hurried along the walk, shouldering roughly through a crowd of people who wanted to shake his hand. He got to his room, locked the door behind him, and began gathering his few personal belongings. Talk from the scattering crowd drifted through his partly opened window. He heard spoken the name of Ray McQueen.

It was dark when he walked out to the street and made his way to the blacksmith shop. Tension still had a grip on the town, and people looked at him as if they had never seen him before. Well, they hadn't, he told himself. They had known Will Bassick. He took a last long look around at the blacksmith shop, then closed the two swinging doors, slung his saddlebags over his shoulder, and walked toward the livery stable.

Chet Hillick came running up behind him. "Will," he said. "There's no need of this. What a man used to be—"

"He can't easily forget," the old gunfighter ground out. "Leave me alone, Chet."

"You just killed a wild animal, Will."

"More than that," Bassick snapped back, and quickened his step.

"Will!"

HE FELL back on his heels, turned slowly. Nora Winton was standing under the big cottonwood near the corner of the blacksmith shop. Chet Hillick hurried away. The blacksmith walked slowly

toward the woman who stood like a statue in the dark, her hands clasped in front of her.

"It's Ray McQueen," he said. "You can't ever forget. What good is any talk between us now?"

"Will, I found out much later," the woman said. "Dan did steal that cattle. You had a legal right to kill a rustler."

He looked close into her eyes, but saw no unbending in their depths, She was looking at Ray McQueen and not at Will Bassick.

"I want to tell you this before I go, Nora," he said almost angrily. "I never hunted men. I was uncommon fast with a sixgun, so they came hunting me. I kept moving on but they kept finding me. I had to stand up to them or die, Nora. They built the name of Ray McQueen into an ugly thing. So finally I had to run." He drew his breath in deeply, glanced up the street. "It was good here, mighty good."

He looked into her eyes again. "Figure you know now why I never spoke of something that . . . Well, I'll be getting along, Nora. You tell Mary to hang on to Tim Dollitt. I guess she'll get over hating me some day. Try and make her believe I never knew it was her father I—"

He turned away, but she reached out and caught him by the sleeve. "Don't go, Will Bassick," she whispered. He reached out for her, but she stepped back. "Not now, Will. Please give me a little time. I—I'm sure everything will be all right!"

Will Bassick stood in the dark shadows of the cottonwood a long time after Nora had gone, the full import of her words finally registering. He walked to the blacksmith shop and flung a big door open. Inside he set a lantern going and placed it on the anvil, then spread his hands out and stared at them.

They were hard and callused and burn-scarred, but with them he would build a house some day. The day a man named McQueen would die forever. He already could hear Nora's voice calling him in to supper.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

LONE WOLF BOUNTY

An Exciting Novel Featuring Jim Hatfield

By JACKSON COLE

and

GUN THE MAN DOWN

A Hard-Hitting Novelet

By JOE ARCHIBALD

The Wildling

Bring me the song that the wind-swept pines
Croon, in the darkened night.
The feel of the night-wind on my cheek,
The sound of the gurgling, chuckling creek.

Give me a wolf cry, keen and chill,
Sight of the moon over some high hill,
Smell of leaf-mold in a hidden glen,
Where deer come to feed, and come again.

I'll take a campfire's flickering light,
Warm in the frosty dawn.
Wind and the sun, and a trail by day,
One leading onward, up and away.

Give me my boots and a pair of jeans,
A bed of coals and a can of beans.
Give me darkness, silence, dreamless sleep,
Where aspens quiver, and willows weep.

In the city's crowds, I am alone.
God, I have wandered—take me home.

By Donna Cordi

Fortune's

Woman

by CLARK GRAY

He saved her from her brutal husband and thought that was that — but he found it was only the beginning of trouble

CHAPTER I

Surprise Stowaway

A NOISY dice game was going on in the dining saloon of the *Summer Belle*, stern-wheeled Missouri-river packet from St. Louis. At the other end of the room, a group of bearded Mennonites were singing hymns. Roger Fortune had no stomach for either pastime, so he pushed outside to the railing of the boiler deck and stood looking at the stars.

This far north the stars were bright and clear and cool. Fortune looked at them a long time. He was a tall man wearing a Texas gun and a Texas hat, and now plainly he was bored. For the first three days out of Westport, he had enjoyed his fellow passengers, the miners, Indian agents, fur trappers, settlers, military men, feathered Indians, black slaves, all headed north for the emigrant trails or the mines. But he had had enough. Now he wanted nothing

so much as the silent loneliness of his little mountain ranch, high above the mine fields. Yet he would not reach it until late tomorrow, and the knowledge made him fretful.

He sighed and was thinking of bed when a whisper reached him. "Mister, help me! Help me!"

Fortune swerved sharply toward the sound. It had come a shadowy cluster of pickled-pork and molasses barrels stacked on the darkened deck. He rolled a barrel swiftly to one side and saw her crouched there.

Blood dripped from her face.

FOR a shocked minute, Fortune could only stare. She was small, young, pretty, with startling blue eyes. She hugged her knees under her chin. The blood came from a wide cut on her cheekbone.

Fortune said, "Are you bad hurt, miss?"

She shook her head. "He hit me only once."

"Who? Your husband?"

"Yes. Will you help me? I—I haven't anybody I can ask. You've got a—a kind face."

Fortune hesitated. Through experience he knew that helping pretty women was apt to lead to trouble.

"Well," he said reluctantly, "What do you want me to do?"

"Just don't let him—hit me again." She stood up. He saw her figure outlined under her plain cotton dress. She was small, but her ripe curves were surprising—somehow Fortune had expected something more girlish.

He said, "All right. I'll take you to my cabin. We'll see about that cut."

He led her carefully out of the cluster of barrels. He knew this was going to lead to difficulties, but he did not see how he could refuse to help her. He was entering the brightly lit passageway with its deep rugs and its oil paintings when a dark, scowling man entered the passageway from the other end.

"There you are!" the man shouted, shaking a knobby fist. "You will run away and hide, will ye? I'll beat you to a whey!" He came lunging down the passageway.

Fortune felt the girl cling to his arm, shaking with fear. "Help me," she begged. "You don't know how horrible he is!"

Roger Fortune had no choice now. He thrust the girl behind him, almost hating her for the trouble she was causing. He said to her, "Stay there!" and stood in the middle of the narrow hall, arms akimbo, blocking the passageway.

The black-haired man plowed steadily down the thick carpet toward Fortune. He was a sodbuster type—heavy, low-browed, stooped. Once in his schoolboy days, Fortune had seen a picture of Neanderthal man, and suddenly this sodbuster reminded him of that. Fortune had the fleeting thought that this man could have been at home in the ice caves of fifty thousand years ago. And then the man was breathing in his face.

"Git!" the sodbuster roared. "That's my woman there."

Fortune said quietly, "Let her be, mister."

The sodbuster didn't argue; he wasn't the arguing kind. He just reached out two scooplike paws and tried to drag Fortune aside.

Fortune hit him once, on the point of the thick jaw. The sodbuster's head jerked; his eyes blinked, "Why, you scum!" he bellowed.

Fortune never saw the hobnailed boot. It was the look in the sodbuster's eye, the look of cunning, though, that gave him warning. Fortune had just time to twist his body sideward, not much, but enough to take the boot on his hip instead of in the crippling spot for which it had been intended. The blow jarred him to the eyeballs. The sharp hobnails jammed into the flesh of his hip, and searing pain almost blinded him. He felt himself falling, felt dusty carpet in his face. Then he heard the woman scream.

"Help me! Oh, help me!"

Fortune opened his eyes. The sodbuster had closed thick fingers around the woman's wrist. She flailed at him hopelessly. The sodbuster said, "You slut," and slapped her, then she collapsed quivering

and whimpering in his grasp, while he dragged her toward the deck.

Fortune pushed dizzily to his feet. He thought of the gun on his hip but rejected the idea. He went plowing after the sodbuster. He got the man's thick neck in his hands and yanked, hard, trying to upset the fellow backward. It didn't work. The sodbuster only stumbled. Fortune thought wildly that this man must outweigh him by fifty pounds. Then the sodbuster turned a savage face and tried to kick him again.

This time Fortune was ready. He slipped quickly past the lashing hobnailed boot. Past and inside. He drove his fist into the sodbuster's throat, feeling the soft fleshy windpipe collapse under his knuckles. The sodbuster's eyes bulged. He made a choking sound and collapsed soundlessly to the carpet.

FORTUNE stood erect, breathing heavily. He looked at the woman, cowering in a corner.

"Come on," Fortune said quietly, "We'll look at that cut now."

In his cabin, he washed the cut with Missouri River water, certainly not the cleanest liquid on earth but the only kind available. He unpacked the bottle of whisky he was carrying back to his ranch for medicinal purposes and used it for a disinfectant. The woman winced under the sting of it, then smiled at him.

"Thank you. I think you—saved my life."

"I doubt it," Fortune said easily. "He wouldn't have hurt you too much, would he?"

"It isn't that. If you hadn't helped me, I was going to—throw myself overboard."

Fortune studied her. Those blue eyes were the most striking thing about her, a startlingly brilliant blue in her tanned face. He decided she had gone through some terrible experience.

He said, "Nothing is that bad."

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "You just don't know. You heard him call me a—a slut, didn't you? Well, it's true. That's what I am."

"I doubt that," Fortune said gently. "I've had my share of experience. You don't look like one."

She smiled. "Thank you. You're a gentleman."

"Hardly. Just a small-time mountain rancher."

She looked at him curiously. She was silent for awhile. Those big blue eyes hung to his face.

"I'm Mary Thorndyke," she said at last. "My husband's name is Jed. We come from Missouri."

Fortune said, "Roger Fortune. Texan."

"You have a ranch up here somewhere?"

He nodded. "In the hills above the mines. I'm going back there now. I've just been down to Westport buying a blooded bull."

"I never heard of a stock ranch this far north. Or of a man here more interested in cattle than in gold."

He grinned. "Cattle can rough it through our winters, if they have enough hay. And as for the gold—well, Mary, I just never cared much. I make a living, selling fat calves to the miners. That's enough for me. I'm a lonesome sort of cuss. I like it that way."

She watched him strangely. "You're an unusual man, aren't you?"

Before Fortune could answer, a pounding fist hammered on the cabin door.

Again Fortune thought of the gun on his hip. And again he decided against it. He crossed the floor and calmly opened the door.

Jed Thorndyke, the black-browed sodbuster, stood outside it scowling at him. At Thorndyke's side, a silvery old man in a blue-and-gold uniform bowed politely.

"Mr. Fortune? I'm Jonas Ashburn, Captain of this packet. May we come in?"

Fortune realized he was in a delicate legal position. Protecting another man's wife might be uncomfortably close to kidnaping in the eyes of the law. He was beginning to regret bitterly the impulse that had made him stroll out of the *Summer Belle's* dining salon a few minutes ago. He shrugged and flung the door wide.

Captain Ashburn and Jed Thorndyke clumped inside and took seats on the bed.

"Mr. Fortune," the captain said gently, "there seems to be a—misunderstanding. This lady is Mr. Thorndyke's wife, is she not?"

"So I understand," Fortune answered mildly.

"And you are keeping her here by force?"

"I'm not *keeping* here at all. She asked me to protect her. I'm doing it. Nothing more."

The captain blinked. "But sir, a wedded wife is under the protection of her husband."

Silently Fortune jerked his thumb at the cut an Mary Thorndyke's cheek. "Protection, Cap'n?"

Jed Thorndyke blustered, "Man's got a right to learn his wife some decency, ain't he? She's a no-good slut, I tell you! She'll sleep with any man that asks her. I was just learning her what happens to sluts!"

FORTUNE said gently, "Mister, this is my cabin. You behave like a gentleman, or out you go!"

Thorndyke's black eyes glittered, "Why, you frog-legged beanpole—"

The captain said, "Gentlemen, gentlemen! Let's talk sensibly, please. Mr. Fortune, a man does have the right to control his wife, doesn't he? Maybe you and I don't agree with the way he does it, but this lady is *his* wife, not yours or mine. And if he wants to—ah—discipline her, well . . ."

Fortune said coldly, "To hell with that! I'll not turn her over to this cave-man against her will!"

The captain eyes him steadily, "Then you are willing to take the responsibility for this—lady?"

Fortune hesitated. Somehow he sensed that destiny had flung him an important decision. He was by nature careful; he disliked acting on the spur of the moment. Yet now he must, and it irritated him.

He thought rapidly. One thing was certain. If he had to take this woman under his wing, it would have to be for the shortest possible time. Fortune knew himself for a strange man, with strange needs. For twenty-six years he had searched for a life that would satisfy him, and now at last he had found it in his lonely mountain paradise. A woman would spoil that, he was sure. She would clash against the sense of passionate awe he felt when wandering among his big trees or fishing by his quiet creek. Especially a woman with an angry husband somewhere in the background. Yet what else could he do?

Fortune sighed and looked at her. She sat quietly dabbing tears with the heel of her hand, in an oddly childlike way.

"All right, damn it," he said to the captain, "I'll be responsible. For awhile, anyhow."

CHAPTER II

Left-handed Judge

FIRST there was the job of getting rid of Jed Thorndyke, who blustered and threatened, but couldn't do much else under the captain's steely eye. Then, after Throndyke and the captain had gone, there remained the problem of sleeping arrangements.

Fortune solved that by spending the night curled in the passageway outside his door. He didn't sleep much. Late passengers kept stumbling over his legs, and besides, he kept wondering what he was going to do with Mary. In the morning, he sent a servant for her luggage and took her to breakfast.

He faced her across a spotless white tablecloth while Negro servants silently brought eggs and coffee. The cut on her cheek-bone seemed better; she seemed somehow younger to Fortune this morning, and oddly appealing as she smiled at him shyly.

He said, "You're a beautiful girl, Mary Thorndyke. Too beautiful, probably, for your own good."

Her smile faded. Those blue eyes clung to his face.

"I can't help it!" she pleaded. "It isn't my fault men always think that." Suddenly the blue eyes filled, and she ducked her head. She began to eat rapidly and daintily.

Fortune said, "We dock in a half-hour. I've decided to take you to my ranch; it's the safest place I can think of. The *Summer Belle* is bound upstream to the head of navigation, but she'll be back in about three weeks. I'll get you back aboard for the downstream trip. You have folks down south some place, haven't you?"

She nodded. She wouldn't look at him. "Cousins who live near St. Jo. I suppose I could go to them."

"All right," Fortune said, "Then that's settled. When you've finished eating, I'll show you my new bull, if you'd like."

He showed her his bull in the wooden pen on the freight deck. He tried to take his usual pride in the shining red of the magnificent shorthorn's, pelt, in the fine large head and massive shoulders. But her face, her eyes, kept haunting him.

When the boat docked, later, he led her ashore through the usual noisy madhouse of a Missouri River mining town. This town also was headquarters for all the backwoods mining area for a hundred miles around, and of course that meant saloons, dance-halls and gambling halls, three streets of them. Burly miners crowded docks, shouting catcalls at every woman passenger in sight. Tall Indians stood in the background, staring curiously.

Fortune led Mary Thorndyke past a row of waiting freight wagons toward the livery. Rounding the hotel, he caught sight of Jed Thorndyke talking earnestly with a pale man in a dark coat. Thorndyke caught sight of the mountain rancher, recognized him, scowled, and called out challengly, "You two ain't seen the last of me! Remember that."

Fortune merely nodded and took Mary's arm and led her quietly on across the dusty street. Fifteen minutes later, they rode stirrup to stirrup out of town, having left instructions for the transfer of his bull to the town stockyards.

Long experience had taught Fortune one thing about his fellowman. That was to expect the worst. He had no illusions about Jed Thorndyke. The man was a brute, and his pride had been hurt. The result quite probably might be some attempt at revenge. Fortune prudently decided to be prepared.

During the next few days after reaching the ranch high in the mountain he kept Mary Thorndyke constantly under his eye. He spent most of the time rounding up his cattle which had strayed during his trip south. This meant long hours in the saddle for both of them. To his surprise, Mary could chouse wild heifers up a steep mountain slope as well as any Texan. As the days went by, her cheeks tanned. Her blue eyes sparkled with health.

When a week had slipped by without a sign from her husband, Fortune relaxed a little. Especially on the day he found the tintype.

It was a small tintype in a brooch. It showed a thin-faced, smiling young man, definitely not Jed Thorndyke. Mary had accidently left it on the kitchen table while she went to bathe at the spring. When she returned, Fortune handed the tintype to her without comment.

Her freshly scrubbed face flushed. "You —aren't going to turn me out, are you?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm no good. This man—he was the one—"

FORTUNE said, "Mary, every human being makes mistakes. That doesn't mean they're no good."

Her eyes moved away from him then. "I—I didn't love him, not really. I was sorry for him. He was a lunger. He was already half dead when he came to live with me and Jed on our farm."

She raised her face to Fortune. Tears glittered in her eyes. "He had never known a woman, not once in his life, and he was dying. I know it's crazy and unbelievable, but I—I hated to let him die without having known a little love."

She dabbed at her tears with that curious gesture of hers, using the heels of her palms. She said, "Jed found us. Jed

knocked him down. He didn't get up. When we got the doctor, he was dead. The doctor said his disease was responsible and I guess it was. But if Jed hadn't knocked him down, he might have lived a few weeks longer." She flung up her head and turned on Fortune defiantly. "I'm not sorry. Jed called me a slut, and I guess I am. But I'm glad I gave him a—a moment of happiness before he died."

Roger Fortune felt a curious change taking place inside him. Years ago he had ruled women out of his life. His first love now were his mountains, his cattle, and the long slow days of chopping firewood or curing hay upon his hillsides. He had planned his life alone because he wanted it that way. Yet now the thought nagged him that maybe, just maybe, he had been a plain damned fool.

He took his fishing gear and went wandering off alone. He knew where an old muskelunge lived under a quiet overhang of the creek. He had been trying to hook the big fellow for a year and a half. Now he made his quiet approach, taking great pains not to let his shadow fall across the surface of the still water. He dropped his bait gently, then settled back with his pipe to wait and think, and try to understand himself.

It was a smiling day with cotton-fluff clouds floating in white globs across the sun. Fortune's keen pleasure in loneliness had never been so great. He heard a squirrel chattering somewhere. An old crow came flapping into sight and lit on a tree scarcely thirty feet away. Fortune tried to convince himself that this was worth more than any woman on earth, this sense of kinship with his mountains and his sky. He felt a gentle nibble at the end of his line and he knew that the muskelunge was playing with him.

Then a shadow fell across him. "Roger," she said, "I—I wondered where you were."

Silvery fins flashed beneath the water as the muskelunge took alarm at the sound of her voice. Wings flapped; the old crow rose in the air and took his way off over the hills. And Fortune's pleasure in the day evaporated.

"Damn it, you scared off my fish," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I—didn't think." Instantly she was all apology. "Do—you want me to leave?"

"It's all right," Fortune said, but it wasn't. "No, you don't have to leave."

She sat down beside him, unpinned her long hair and fluffed it out to catch the sunlight. Fortune drew in his line and rebaited his hook. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her rearrange her hair. Her mouth was full of pins. The lift of her white arms and the tightness of her blouse against her breast held his eye. He found himself envying the sick man who once had known her so well.

"Mary," he said, "what was your husband's business in this country?"

She looked at him sharply, took the pins from her mouth and began to arrange them in a complicated pattern on a flat rock.

"I—I don't know how to say this," she said slowly. "But Jed was planning a terrible revenge on me. He had written letters to a man up here, a man named Norton. He and Norton had arranged for me to go into—into a dancehall. That's why I fought so hard to get away from Jed, that night on board the *Summer Belle*."

Fortune stared at her. He couldn't believe her. He had known his share of dancehall girls, had even heard this sort of story before, but his mind would not accept it. Free human beings could not be sold into such slavery, yet that was what she was saying.

He said drily, "Aren't you being a little romantic, Mary?"

SHE turned her big blue eyes on him. "Do you think so, Roger? Suppose my skin were black, instead of white? Being sold happens to Negro girls all the time. Why shouldn't it happen to me?"

"Because you're not a Negro slave. You could go to the law. The law wouldn't let any man force you into—that."

She said gently, "What law are you talking about?"

And that, Fortune knew suddenly, was

the answer. Because the only law in the towns around here were miner courts, rough and ready organizations which were notoriously weak where subtler human rights were involved.

The conversation bothered Fortune more than he wanted to admit. He said gruffly, "Let's walk back. I've got to ride to town tomorrow."

Next day he left her in his locked cabin with instructions to open the door to nobody but himself. He rode to town, winding down his narrow mountain trails with his mind a thousand miles away. He couldn't stop thinking of the blue-eyed young wife and the dying boarder, back in St. Jo, Missouri. He could understand why Mary had given herself to the dying man. He could understand Jed Thorndyke's rage and wounded pride.

He could understand too much. That had always been Fortune's trouble. He understood so much that right and wrong lost their simplicity and the world because too complicated to be lived in. That was why he had sought the loneliness of his mountains, where life was simpler, where he could act without doubt.

In town he rode past the hotels and the dancehalls, where even at this hour jangly piano music tinkled through the batwing doors. He reached the stockyards by the river, and the shorthorn bull came snorting to the side of its pen to greet him. Fortune entered the pen and scratched the gentle bull on the head, admiring him. The animal had recovered nicely from the damp confinement of the *Summer Belle's* freight deck. Fortune turned his horse loose in the pen with the bull and went wandering uptown for lunch.

He ate a steak from one of his own calves at the Gold Nugget Hotel, then approached the old man at the desk.

"Hi, Sam. Who's the judge of the miner's court, nowadays?"

The old man leaned over the counter and spat into a brass cuspidor. "Howdy, Roger. Why, last I recollect it was Greg Sparks. He works a claim out on Jubal Creek."

"Sparks, eh? Good man, is he?"

"Good as they come. Studied some law, even, they say. That's more'n any other miners' judge I ever heard tell of."

Fortune grinned. "All right—one more thing. Ever hear of a Jed Thorndyke?"

"That one!" The old clerk made a disgusted face. "He's emptied a barrel full of bottles into that big belly of his since he staggered off the *Summer Belle* last week. He teams it with Abe Norton, the hombre that owns the Sweet Potato. That's a tough and woolly pair for you, Roger."

Fortune went hunting. It took him an hour and a half to locate Greg Sparks on Jubal Creek. Sparks, a brawny, middle-aged man was peeled down to his undershirt, shoveling ore out of the creek bed into a sluice box. While Fortune told his story, Sparks leaned on his shovel and listened intently.

"I've heard of Jed Thorndyke," Sparks said finally. "And if he's teamed with Abe Norton, we've got a bad combination on our hands. That Sweet Potato is the filthiest dive in town."

Fortune said, "Do you think it might be true, what Mary told me? That they plan to force her to—to work in that filthy place?"

"I don't know," Sparks said. "If it is, I'll do my damndest to stop it."

"What can you and the miners' court do?"

"Not much," Sparks admitted, rubbing his chin. "We're not legal law, exactly. We're just filling in till the country grows up enough to get a Federal court. We can talk to Norton, but hell, that won't be any help."

Fortune said, "You're a judge. Can you divorce people?"

"Well," Sparks said thoughtfully, "I'm a kind of left-handed judge. I reckon I could grant a left-handed divorce."

Fortune grinned. "That might be enough. If Thorndyke thought he was divorced, he might figure he had no hold over his wife. He might let her alone then. You think so?"

Sparks closed one eye, squinted at him, then grinned broadly, showing a missing tooth.

"Son," he said, "Let's give it a try."

CHAPTER III

"Where's My Wife?"

THE Sweet Potato was a slab shack with whipsawed, unpainted bar furnishings. Fortune leaned against the rough bar, and a splinter pierced the side of his hand. He pulled out the splinter and grinned at Sparks who had lined up beside him.

Sparks said, "Well, it's one step better than the street."

"A small step," Fortune said.

Then a voice behind him said, "Hi, honey," and Fortune turned. At first sight of the dancehall girls who stood there Fortune knew that if Mary had to live like this she would kill herself. The girl wore a grimy knee-length skirt, and a bandanña was tied around her breasts. Her knees were dirty. She wore too much makeup. She smelled of cheap perfume. Her eyes looked haunted.

"How about a dance?" she asked Fortune.

Fortune felt slightly sick. He said, "No, thanks. I'd like to see Jed Thorndyke or Abe Norton, or both of them."

The girl looked at him swiftly, then walked out through a side door. In a minute Jed Thorndyke entered, accompanied by the pale-faced man in the dark coat whom Fortune now knew must be Abe Norton.

Thorndyke rubbed a whisky-shaking hand across a black growth of beard. "Where's my wife?" he growled.

Fortune said clamly, "Where you won't find her. She's through with you, Thorndyke."

"She may be through with me, but I ain't through with her."

The pale Abe Norton walked behind the bar and poured four drinks. "Gents," he said, "Let's be friends."

Fortune studied the saloonman. The white face, the narrow shoulders, the neat shoestring tie. Everything else about the Sweet Potato might be dirty, but its owner was scrupulously clean.

"Mister," Fortune asked, "how much have you paid Thorndyke, here, for his wife?"

Norton said calmly, "A thousand dollars down. Another thousand on delivery. It's a high price, but I've seen the girl. She'll draw a good trade."

"Suppose she won't come?"

"She'll come. She's his wife. He's going to make her come."

Fortune tossed off his drink. It was cheap liquor. He felt the heat of it slide slowly down his throat. He looked around at the rough wooden tables, the sour sawdust on the floor. He set his shot glass down and studied every lady near—the girl with dirty knees who stood now in the background, Thorndyke the caveman, Norton, the trader in cheap alcohol and soiled flesh, Greg Sparks of Jubal Creek, the man of home-made law.

Fortune said, "Judge Sparks, would you be so kind?"

Sparks' gap-toothed grin was the most cheerful thing in the barroom. "Happy to accomodate you, Roger. I brought a pencil and paper special for the occasion. I'll write out the decree right here."

Fortune felt the sudden tension that came to Abe Norton who exchanged a sharp glance with Thorndyke. Sparks, who had produced a piece of paper and a stub of pencil began to scribble awkwardly, spelling aloud as he wrote.

I hereby declare, Sparks spelled, that Mary Thorndyke is divorced this day from her husband, Jed, on account of he tried to sell her into a life of infamy.

Sparks signed the paper with a flourish: Greg Sparks, Miners' Judge.

"Now that word infamy," he said, "is one of the best words I own, gents. It's a real peach, ain't it?" Sparks folded the paper, bowed low, and extended the "decree" toward Thorndyke. "Here you are, mister. Signed and sealed."

Thorndyke gaped stupidly and extended a hand to take the paper. But Abe Norton struck down the big paw swiftly.

"Don't take it, Jed. It's got to be served on you, before it's legal. If you refuse it, the divorce won't hold."

Fortune had a sudden overwhelming urge to laugh. With difficulty he choked it back. The ruse was working out better than he and Jubal Sparks had hoped. It didn't make much difference whether Sparks' tendered divorce was legal or not. The important thing was for Thorndyke to *think* it was legal. And suddenly Fortune thought of a way to help that along.

SWIFTLY he drew his sixgun, pointed it at the third button on Thorndyke's shirt.

"Take the paper," he ordered quietly.

Thorndyke's dark face paled. He looked at Norton for help, but Norton had moved back at sight of the gun.

"Don't do it, Jed!" Norton shouted. "This jasper ain't got the guts to shoot."

Fortune moved the gun an inch and pulled the trigger. The sixgun exploded, flame belched and the bullet skimmed past Thorndyke and thudded into the wall. The girl screamed. A cloud of scorched-smelling black powder smoke lifted toward the ceiling, and Thorndyke's jaw dropped and began to shake.

"Take the paper," Fortune said gently.

Thorndyke snatched the paper and stuffed it, trembling, into his shirt pocket. "All right, I took it. Don't shoot me!"

Fortune made a supreme effort not to laugh in Thorndyke's face. He forced a scowl. "Now remember, mister," he said, "you're divorced from your wife. You got no claim on her. If you come messing around her, I'll kill you."

Holstering, Fortune turned on his heel and stalked from the barroom.

Outside, he turned right up the board walk, hearing Greg Sparks' bootheels tap wood behind him. Fortune kept going till he reached a corner, when he turned. There he halted beside a rain-barrel and waited for Sparks to reach him. Sparks' weathered face was wrinkled in a broad grin.

"Well, it worked," Sparks said, "That was a stroke of genius, pulling the gun on him. Now he thinks for sure he's divorced."

Now Fortune allowed himself the pleasure of smiling. "Is he?"

"Hell, I don't know," Sparks said, "I guess he is if he thinks he is. I never knew it was so easy. I can call to mind a few other married couples I'd like to try that on."

A half-hour later, Fortune said good-by to Greg Sparks at the livery stable. "Thanks for everything," Fortune said, "You helped me handle a bad situation."

"You haven't handled it yet," Sparks reminded him. "Even if Thorndyke does think he's divorced, he might still try to deliver on his deal with Norton. I'll keep an eye on him. If he leaves town, I'll have him trailed. But Roger, I've got one more idea."

Fortune swung into saddle and sat looking down on the stocky miner. "What is it?"

"Well," Sparks said, "now that I've learned how to unhitch people, I'd like to try my hand at hitching somebody. You ever figure on marrying this young lady?"

Fortune said gently, "Judge, it isn't what you think."

Sparks shrugged. "I don't think anything, except that girl ought to be protected. Roger, miners are funny people. A single or divorced woman in a mining camp is in for trouble. But a married woman or a widow is generally as safe on the street as in church. Now suppose something happened to you! Who'd take care of that girl, if she didn't have no Mrs. in front of her name?"

Fortune said, "I'm not the marrying kind."

Sparks studied him a moment. "Maybe you just haven't found out yet what you really are. Well, if you change your mind, let me know."

Fortune waved his hand and kneed his pony out of the stable. In minutes more he had picked up his bull from the stockyards and was driving the animal out of town.

It was late afternoon when he sighted a small herd of his own cows and turned the bull loose. He sat his horse a moment in the lengthening shadow of his mountaintop, watching the thick-set red animal wander toward his future harem. One of the cows lifted her head and lowed. The

bull bellowed back.

Fortune rode away, satisfied. He crossed the creek and climbed among the evergreens toward his own cabin. Suddenly he reined back, changing his mind. He didn't want to face Mary just yet. He felt a need to think.

HE RETURNED to the creek and took a hook and line from his saddlebags, where he always carried them. He cut a pole and found a few white grubs under a rock. Quietly he slipped to the overhang beneath which the old muskelunge lived. He dropped his baited hook gently.

He waited.

High overhead, a squirrel's claws scratched bark. A bluejay began to talk in the trees at his right, and from a cluster of bushes a half-grown rabbit hopped curiously.

Fortune felt tension drain out of him. His woods, his mountains did this to him. He stretched out his feet and felt the gentle nibble at the end of his line. And once again her shadow fell across the water. The rabbit hopped away with a bobbing white tail. The nibble at the end of his line wasn't there any more. Fortune looked up and saw her wide blue eyes.

"Oh, hell!" he said. "Won't you ever learn? Anyhow, I told you to stay in the cabin."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I've been alone all day. I couldn't stand it. I thought I'd take a walk—"

Fortune felt a sudden surge of guilt, remembering her troubles. "I'm sorry, Mary. I shouldn't have been so rough."

"It's all right." She turned from him, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. "You've been so good to me—better than I deserve—"

Fortune stood up and took her elbows. He said, "Mary," and without warning, without plan, he was kissing her. He kissed her mouth, her throat, cupping the back of her head in his palms, feeling her warm, tear-salty response.

He said, "Mary, I can't help it! I love you."

She hung there in his arms, limp, her eyes moving over his face. Fortune knew that she was his, if he wanted her now. He knew that she loved him. He felt himself lifted by a passion beyond control; he clutched her close. And his cattle saved him!

A wild-eyed calf burst through the underbrush almost at his feet. The calf stopped short, then darted off at an angle. Behind it, Fortune heard hoofbeats, the crackle of brush. Another calf bawled in sudden fear.

Instinct, or some subtler sense, told him the truth.

"Mary," he said against her ear, "your husband has trailed me. There must be several men, to judge from the way the cattle have been scared. We've got to get to the cabin. Fast!"

He felt her body go rigid in his arms. But she made no sound, and Fortune was glad of that. Silently he strode across the creek bank to the tree where he had tethered his horse. He mounted, with Mary behind him. In minutes they reached the cabin.

He got the doors and windows barred, and his ammunition spread before him, just as five horsemen galloped into the clearing. Fortune plainly recognized Thorndyke and Norton with them were three of the toughest-looking miners he had ever seen in his life.

CHAPTER IV

Cabin Siege

FORTUNE had his rifle and his sixgun. He had some two hundred rounds of ammunition. The cabin was well stocked with food and water. He hoped that he could withstand a siege.

There was only one way Thorndyke and Norton could force him and Mary out of the cabin. With luck, they wouldn't think of it.

He fired the first shot through the window. "Get back!" he bawled. "You're not wanted here."

The five men scattered in the tall timber. He handed his rifle to Mary. "Load it."

Mary reloaded his rifle with shaking hands. She was scared, Fortune knew, but she wasn't letting fear turn her into a screaming, clinging liability. Fortune approved of that. He watched her, thinking that this gun showdown had been inevitable from that instant he had rolled away the molasses barrel on the *Summer Belle's* deck and seen her crouching there.

It never pays to help a lady in distress, Fortune thought wildly, and yet he didn't believe that, not really.

"Mary," he said, "which would you rather do, die or let them take you?"

Her hands on the rifle became stilled. Her face tilted to him. "I'd rather die," she said quietly.

"All right," Fortune said, "then keep the rifle. If things get bad, I'll try to—to do it for you. But I may get knocked out first, then you'll have to do it yourself."

She nodded. She said, through pale lips, "Roger, I love you."

"I love you, too," he said. "Though God knows, I didn't want to."

A bullet splintered the window sash beside his head. Glass shattered over him. He ducked back, hearing gunfire now from all sides of the cabin. Heavy slugs thudded into the log walls. One found a chink and came through, clanging off the cookstove.

"On the floor, Mary!" Fortune ordered.

She dropped to the floor. Her pale cheek flattened against the boards. Fortune crossed swiftly to the opposite window, saw a black form flit through trees, and fired. He heard a howl of pain. He grinned savagely.

To his own surprise, he wasn't scared much. He decided that came from loving his mountains and his loneliness. A man who can live alone is not afraid of dying, Fortune believed; he has some deep resource that scatter-brained men can never know. Fortune was more concerned for Mary than he was for himself. He suddenly wished he had accepted Greg Sparks' offer to perform a marriage ceremony. That might have given Mary some protection now.

The fusillade of bullets against the log walls continued for a few minutes longer, then abruptly died away. Fortune heard a harsh voice call his name from somewhere in the timber. He recognized Jed Thorndyke's voice. Cautiously he moved to a shattered window.

"What you want?"

"My wife," Thornywid answered. "Send her out, and we won't hurt her."

"What'll you do with her?"

"She's a slut. She'll go where others sluts go."

Fortune glanced at Mary. Her face was still pressed against the floor. He knew without asking again what her answer to this would be.

"Thorndyke," he called out to the trees, "what happens to me, if I send her out?"

"You're going to die," Thorndyke bellowed. "No man steals my wife without paying, one way or the other."

Again Fortune felt a savage, senseless grin twist at his face. He supposed that was an ancestral thing, held over from a time when his ancestors had roamed woods like these and fought wild animals for their food.

"You come and get us both!" he called to Thorndyke."

There was no answer to this. Then a bullet cut through the smashed window and shattered the lamp that hung from the rafters over Fortune's head.

It was after sundown now, and dusk was creeping through the trees, when something of which Fortune had been afraid of happened. He saw a flicker of yellow flame. On its heels a great wad of flaming dried grass came catapulting through the air to land ten feet from the cabin and flicker out on the hard ground of the clearing.

THE attachers had rigged the catalput out of a bent-over sapling. Their missile was chunks of wood for weight, tied together with burning dry grass. It was an imitation of the flaming arrows used by the plains Indians, awkward, but effective enough. Sooner or later, if they kept trying, one of the flaming missiles would stick to his cabin roof.

Fortune was certain now that he was going to die. But he surprised himself by being as calm as before. There were certain things to be done, if his dying was to serve a useful purpose. He steeled his mind against any further thought of death. When the time came to face it, he would face it. But not before.

"Mary," he said quietly, "there's a pencil and paper in the kitchen table drawer. Get them, will you?"

While she crawled to the table, he fired six rapid shots at the source of the yellow flame, hoping to stave off the inevitable for a few more minutes. So far as he could tell, he hit nothing at all.

Then Mary was thrusting paper in his hands. By the dying light, he folded it against his knee and wrote rapidly:

> I hereby take Mary Thorndyke for my wife. She is my sole heir. If I die, all my cattle are hers, to do what she wants with. I request Greg Sparks to help her get justice for all her claims.

He signed it with his scrawled name, folded it, handed it back to Mary.

"Mary," he said, "it's the best I can do."

Another burst of flaming grass that came arching through the air sailed almost into the window, but at the last moment fell short. Fortune fired, and this time answering bullets screeched through the window at him. One fanned his face. Another jerked at his scalp; he lifted a hand and brought down a wisp of clipped hair.

From the floor, Mary said, "Roger, I love you, but how can you marry me? I'm already married."

"I got you a divorce," Fortune said, "I haven't had time to tell you. I'm not sure either the divorce or the marriage is legal, but if one is, maybe the other is. Listen, Mary, you've got the rifle?"

She nodded.

Fortune said, "I'm going to leave you. If you have to use the rifle, put the muzzle in your mouth. It's the surest way."

Again she nodded, her lip clenched between her teeth.

Fortune said, "Get me that old blue dress of yours."

"My dress? What for?"

"I'm going to wear it," Fortune said.

The dress was too small in the waist. Fortune had to rip it with his knife. But he got it on at last. He tied one of Mary's bonnets tightly over his head. He wanted desperately to kiss her, but he didn't dare take time, because at any moment another of those chunks of flame might strike the cabin roof. He hobbled to the window, taking short steps because of the skirts.

"Thorndyke?" he bellowed.

Silence. The woods were almost black now.

Finaly Thorndyke's voice drifted to him. "Yeah. What you want?"

"I'm sending Mary out," Fortune called. "Don't shoot her!"

Immediately he plunged through the shattered window, giving them no time to plan. He held his sixgun jammed tight under his armpit, hoping it wouldn't show. He ran as fast as he could without tripping over the skirts.

And now at last Roger Fortune let himself face the fact of dying. In another few seconds, minutes at most, it would be over. He ran hard through the dusk, and the big trees came nearer, and he thought, Let me kill them all, let me make it safe for Mary.

He saw a white face against a tree-trunk, drew his gun from beneath his armpit and fired.

A harsh voice bawled, "It's him. He's tricked us!"

Gunfire erupted, and the night became orange darts of flame. Agony speared his thigh, knocking him down. He was rolling on the earth, crushing underbrush, when he saw Abe Norton's pale face, and Norton was aiming a rifle at him. Fortune rolled and fired, and one of Norton's eyes became nothing but a hole. Norton died in front of him.

FORTUNE had to get to his feet, and he knew it. He rolled against a sapling, scrabbled for a branch, pulled himself erect. The agony in his thigh was like a pitchfork, stabbing, but he bit his tongue and forced himself to run staggering through the trees.

He heard voices. Somebody was crying, "You can't kill him—he's a devil. Let's

get out of here!" Hoofbeats sounded, and Fortune felt blood running down into his boot, and suddenly, in front of him, stood Thorndyke and one of the miners.

And this, Fortune knew, was the moment in which he was fated to die. Thorndyke and the miner twisted toward him, two guns came up. He might have had a chance with one of them, but not with two. Deliberately he selected Thorndyke as the man he would take with him when he left this earth. He aimed and fired.

Thorndyke clenched his throat. Bright blood spurted between Thorndyke's fingers. Thorndyke pitched forward on his face, and from somewhere there was another shot. Fortune waited for the miner's bullet to slam into his flesh.

It didn't. Instead, to his utter astonishment, the miner stumbled against a tree and sat down and fell over, dead, with a bullet-wound beneath his ear. And back in the trees, Fortune saw Mary standing with the rifle in her hands.

"I thought I told you to save that bullet for yourself," he grunted through his pain.

"Oh, darling," she cried, "I just couldn't let you go out there alone to be killed. I had to come, too. Besides, I won't need the extra bullet now. . . ."

A little after midnight, Greg Sparks, a vigilante group and two prisoners rode up to the cabin. Fortune and Mary were drinking coffee and talking about love and fishing and the future of the cattle business for a married man.

Greg Sparks was apologetic. "I promised to keep an eye on Thorndyke for you, Roger, and then like a blamed fool, I let him slip away from me. Time I found out and organized a group, he'd been gone several hours." Sparks jerked a thumb at the two prisoners. "We met these two scalawags high-tailing it back to town. I figured by that you'd given 'em a warm reception."

Fortune nodded. "It was close for awhile." He looked at Mary. "She saved the day, Judge."

Sparks studied Mary shrewdly, "Ma'am, I made this long-legged Texan an offer of my services in the matrimonial line. He turned me down then, but I got a feeling he's changed his mind."

Mary blushed. "He told me. Do—do you think you could marry us?"

"I could try," Sparks said. "If I don't get the knot fastened tight enough to suit you, you can have the captain of the *Summer Belle* do it over again when she docks next week."

Fortune and Mary were married, before the fire at midnight, by a home-made judge, with coffee cups in their hands. It wasn't a church wedding with flowers, but Fortune had a hunch that Mary was the happiest bride north of St. Louis, anyhow.

Two days later, Fortune left the cabin and hobbled alone toward the creek with his fishing pole in his hand. He had been enjoying a sense of peace so deep it scared him. He was afraid it wouldn't last, afraid in some vague way he had angered his destiny by bringing a woman to his mountains. He needed to be alone to feel his way into the future.

He crept silently to the overhang under which the old muskelunge lived. He dropped his baited hook, leaned back against a log. He waited.

The old crow came flapping toward him from over the hill. The crow circled a dead tree, lit, and sat staring at him.

Fortune waited. In a few minutes he felt the gentle nibble on his line.

And then he became aware of Mary, standing behind him.

She had come up so silently that she had made no sound. She had been careful not to let her shadow fall across the water.

UP IN the dead tree, the old crow sat watching. In the clear space before the underbrush the rabbit looked at them with a twitching nose. And under the water, the muskelunge suddenly bit hard at Fortune's bait.

Fortune looked at her, "Well, I'm damned," he said. "Mary, the old crow isn't afraid of you any longer. The rabbit didn't run. Even the fish bit my hook, while you were here."

He paused, letting satisfaction slip into his smile. "I guess my mountains and I won't have to worry about you any longer," he said then. "You're home."

Fate can push a man too far, as in the case of Webb Parish, shotgun guard...

STAGE HAND

by

L. Edward Thompson

THEY came onto Caney Bluffs north of Dalhart about nine that evening, tired and dusty. They could see the lights now and Webb Parish, riding shotgun between Pop Mowery and his kid, blinked watery eyes against the warm breeze that rose from the hot prairie floor.

Two hours back they had passed

Sandy Bottom flats—a gouged creek bottom halt, where Southerland guards usually lit a smoke and started a stream of palaver with their drivers. But Webb Parish had remained silent all the way to these gray bluffs. It was an extra protection he gave his sleeping passengers.

There were times when the cargo didn't amount to much, but to Webb, responsibility wasn't gauged by the value of the article. He looked at his watch and glanced downslope to the distant string of lanterns along Commerce Street.

"Better let 'em out, son. We're running two minutes behind."

Showing pride in his boy, Pop Mowery nodded assent. The young teamster was being trained to take Pop's place. He slapped leather and the coach lurched forward, its thoroughbraces creaking, its iron-rimmed wheels running swiftly along the hard-pack.

Webb Parish held to the iron seat stanchion and leaned out over the wheel. "Wake up, folks! Dalhart's next!"

There were two passengers inside, a man and a woman. The man, red-headed and sharp-nosed, had been studying Webb all the way from Dodge City. The woman was a dance hall girl, on her way to the Lord knew where.

Through drawn leather curtains Webb heard her weary reply. Something in the timbre of her voice reminded Webb of Helen, his wife, and he regarded the black night with stiff sadness.

BESIDE him Pop Mowery turned as if he had read Webb's thoughts, asking, "How's Helen?"

Webb said soberly, "About the same, I guess."

Pop clucked, "Been about a year since she lost the baby. Ought to be on the mend pretty soon."

Webb nodded. "Seems as though." There wasn't any use telling Pop what Doc had said—that unless Helen could get her mind off losing the baby and her fears of this strange, wild country, she wasn't going to get better.

Webb's big hands tightened. Helen was trying—he had to admit that. And if it had been a blow to him to lose the boy, what had it been for the woman who had carried him for all those months.

He straightened slowly and fumbled with the leather safety belt that had anchored him to the seat. He was a big man, heavy of chest and shoulders, with thick arms and great hands.

This was his thirtieth trip to Dodge City—five days, round trip. He counted them the way a patient man paces himself against a tiresome chore. He didn't like working for Southerland but he had tried it on his own and had failed. He blamed no one but himself.

Young Mowery handled the teams expertly, braking the coach with his right boot. At the outskirts of town, he glanced briefly at Webb.

"Better get your shotgun in your lap, Webb—for old Southerland to see."

The boy's father winked and Webb, smiling, reached for the ten-gauge from the wagon boot and laid it across his lap. They rode noisily through the narrow streets of the town amidst barking dogs. At the station the kid set his brakes and handed the reins to a stock tender.

"Check their feet," he ordered, "It's been dry as hell all the way."

He made a young man's descent to the ground. "How about a beer, Webb?" He glanced up, his face young and eager in the stage lights. Since the time Webb had saved the pay-roll with him aboard, the kid had been looking at Webb Parish in a way that made Webb a little humble, and a little scared that maybe he might not measure up to what the kid expected.

Webb swallowed against the dry, parched-lemon feel in his throat. "Thanks, kid," he said, "but I've got to go straight home." He got down slowly, and for a moment, felt the continued motion of the coach.

Pop Mowery slid to the ground beside him. "You go ahead, Webb. I'll check us out. Hope Helen's better."

"Thanks, Pop," Webb said. He was beating road dust from his coat when Cy Southerland, the boss, came out. Old

Southerland took the express box and his lips moved, counting the passengers. "Good trip, boys?"

Buzzards and buffalo, Webb thought bitterly. Two hundred miles of hot sun. Lizzards the length of a man's arm and dust every inch of the way. But he wasn't going to blame Southerland for all that. Where would Webb be if it wasn't for this job? He was grateful.

"Same as usual, Mr. Southerland," he said, handing over the way bills.

Southerland smiled. "You know, Webb, it's been several months since anything happened. Wasn't sure about hirin' you at first, now I figure you're the cheapest kind of insurance. Drivers all like you. Passengers all want to wait for your stage." He motioned with his head, "Come on in'n pick up your pay."

Webb fell into step beside him. "You heard how Helen is, Mr. Southerland?"

"Better," Southerland said. "Some better, I understand."

They were stepping onto the boardwalk when a man's voice reached Webb sharply:

"Mr. Parish?"

Webb turned back and the tall, redheaded passenger came up to him. This was the man Webb had regarded with suspicion on the trip. He wore an Eastern business suit, and looked like a drummer, but he wasn't carrying samples.

HE PUT out his hand to Webb. "I'm Reno Bates, Mr. Parish, from Chicago. I've got a proposition that might interest you . . . How about a drink?"

Webb seldom drank with strangers, but something in this man's proud arrogance made him feel a kinship. Webb had been proud once himself, before he lost the wagons and before the baby died and Helen had taken sick. Now he had become an extremely practical man, perhaps too practical.

"Thanks, Mr. Bates," Webb said. "I believe I will."

He turned over his mail sacks at the post-office and drew his pay. Then going into the Oasis, he met Bates at the bar.

"Parish," the redhead began abruptly. "Twice a month you carry a three-thousand-dollar pay-roll in that strong box of yours. Did you know that?"

Webb took a draught of beer and wiped his lips. "I ought to. Three different ones have tried heisting it." He glanced down and then back at the redhead. "They didn't succeed. They're all three in Huntsville prison. I was pretty lucky."

"I hear you're not the kind of man who has much luck, Parish. Old Mowery told me you'd had a long string of bad luck."

The old weariness touched Webb. "I've had my share of bad times. But a man's got to be patient." He reached slowly for the beer.

Bates leaned forward. "How'd you like to have a string of good luck for a change? How'd you like it if you could re-equip that freight outfit you lost last year?"

The man's words struck dry tender and set a flame going in Webb's mind. "I'd like nothing better, Mr. Bates. That's why I ride shotgun. It pays good and I figure if nothing happens I'll have my freight outfit operating in a year."

Bates laughed. "With your luck, I wouldn't bet on it." He took a drink and set his glass down. "I could show you an easier way."

Webb shifted slowly, seeing craftiness at work in the man's pressuring gaze. This man wasn't interested in investing money —only in acquiring it. And suddenly Webb hated his own plodding efforts.

"I'm always willing to listen," he said.

"There'd be nothing to it," Bates said. "I'd get the drop on you at Sandy Bottom flats and you'd throw down the box. That's all there would be to it."

Webb laughed. "And then they'd send to St. Louis for a Pinkerton to investigate and I'd wind up in Hunstville with the others. No, thanks, Mr. Bates."

"They'd blame me," Bates said. "We'd split and by midnight I'd be on my way to the Border. You could tell them anything. Just so you give me a chance to clear out."

"I don't think so," Webb said. "I need the money but not that bad. Southerland's been good to me."

"No one but the Eastern cattle syndicate gets hurt in this deal," Bates argued. "It's their pay-roll and they can afford the loss. Besides, Parish, they owe you a little something. You've saved three pay-rolls for them all ready."

"That's true, all right," Webb said.

"You'll never make it any other way, Parish. Not with your kind of luck. This is quick and its easy. Think about it. You can let me know tomorrow."

Webb said soberly, "I'll let you know, but don't count on a yes." He finished his beer and paid for it. "My wife's waiting, Mr. Bates, so I'll be going now. Good night."

Webb's place was at the edge of town, a three-room cabin he had built himself. Before Helen had got sick she had fixed it up inside and he had put up a lath fence and made some flower beds. That night, going up the walk, he noticed that the flowers were burned out and that the house needed repair.

He went quietly through the parlor and in the bedroom he eased off his coat and laid it across a chair.

"Is that you, Webb?" Helen said sleepily.

Webb turned up the lamp and sat down on the bed. He touched Helen's face with his big hand and felt her cheek tremble against it.

"Bad dreams again?" he asked.

SHE smiled, trying to hide the lie from him. "Not too bad. I'm glad you're home, Webb. I worry about you."

"Nothing to worry about," Webb said. He looked at her, the bitterness and sadness gone for the moment. He knew only that he loved this woman and wanted her well again.

"You look better," he said.

"I feel fine," Helen sat up and Webb adjusted the pillows at her back.

"I'll wash up and then we can talk," he said.

He went out to the kitchen, lit a lamp, and stood for a moment staring down at the broad yellow flame. He thought of what Bates had offered and wondered if getting Helen to a hospital in the East would help.

Doc Easterly had mentioned that a long time ago. "She needs something to take ahold of, Webb. She's trying, but the trouble is she's got nothing to cling to. She came out here afraid of the country, afraid she'd be scalped or something, and then she lost the baby. Now I suspect she's worried about your riding shotgun on that stage."

Webb had nodded. The doctor hadn't mentioned Webb's own failure with the freight line. But that hadn't helped either. Then Webb had said sharply, "You didn't tell Helen I was riding shotgun. I've kept it from her."

The doc had said soberly. "I didn't tell her, Webb. But she knows. You can't keep a thing like that from your wife."

A thrust of weary discouragement touched Webb and he moved onto the porch and drew a pan of water. He stripped to the waist and began dousing water onto his face and neck, remembering Helen had liked city life. She was from St. Louis, had grown up there. Maybe it was wrong to keep her here. But there had never been enough money; and in back of his mind, Webb had hoped she'd learn to like the West as he did. Perhaps it was wrong, but he still hoped for that.

In the morning Webb rose early and fixed breakfast. He woke Helen, carried her into the kitchen, and sat her down at the table.

"You needn't carry me." Helen laughed. "I'm not an invalid."

"I know you're not," Webb said. "But I like doing things for you for a change."

After breakfast he helped her into a dress and they walked slowly out to the porch and sat in the sun.

Webb wanted his pipe then. He was restless without it. There had been so many expenses to cut out; one of them had been his smoking and there were times when he wasn't busy that he reached for his pipe unconsciously. Unable now to sit still he walked to the back of the house. He noted the burned-out flower beds and the many repairs needed on the

screens and along the eaves. When he came back he stopped at the steps and looked up at Helen.

"If I went to town, for a little while, would you be all right?"

"I'll be all right, Webb." Helen smiled. "You get yourself some tobacco. I like smelling your pipe."

Webb stopped at Doc Sam Easterly's office and paid a little on what he owed.

"How's Helen?" Webb asked, counting the money that was left. "She doing any better, Doc?"

Doc Easterly closed the lid of his black medicine box. "Well, no, she isn't, Webb. She isn't better and I'm not sure she'll be getting better, as long as you keep on riding shotgun." He glanced up, "'Course you can't help that, Webb. I know you're doing the best you can. You're patient with her. That's the main thing."

Webb moved slowly toward the door. "I been thinkin' about quittin' Doc," he said bitterly. "For a few minutes last night I thought I'd found something. I got to find something that will pay my bills, and I got to give Southerland notice. I took on some responsibility when I signed up with him."

"Well, don't worry about what you owe me, Webb," Doc said kindly. "I'm not worried none."

WEBB went back into the street. The sun was higher now, lying like a hot flatiron in the town, sending most pedestrians inside for shelter. Webb knew that Reno Bates would be across at the hotel and he debated about seeing the man and being done with it.

Instead, he headed down toward Cain's Mercantile and bought three yeards of bright material for Helen. He paid cash and hurried out.

Cy Southerland was alone when, a few minutes later, Webb went in to see him. He sat at his desk in the small partitioned office. "What's on your mind, Webb? Don't see you much on your days off."

Webb took a chair and slid the package with Helen's dress goods onto the floor. He looked out the open window for a moment, gathering thought.

"Mr. Southerland, you've always wanted that freight contract I hold to Tucumcari. I've always known you'd snap it up once I let my option go."

Southerland showed a quick rise of interest, then eased back confortably in his chair. "It's a good piece of property, Webb."

"A man could make it pay," Webb said. "I was making it and then my mules got sick and I had to shoot most of them. Then Helen had her trouble and I had to have some money." Webb lifted his weight in the chair and sat forward. "That contract runs till next June and the wagons are practically new. They've been gathering dust over at Slattery's barn since I closed down. I could let you have the whole business for a thousand dollars, Mr. Southerland."

The agent didn't say anything.

"You'd pay a hell of a lot more if you bought those wagons in the East," Webb said.

Southerland cast evasive eyes to the desk top, then looked back at Webb. "You got them wagons mortgaged, ain't you, Webb?"

"Mortgaged," Webb said, "but the note's not due."

"You got just thirty days now. Ain't that right?"

Webb pulled back and felt the thin hope fade. Southerland had faced near bankrupcy himself, last year. He had apparently forgotten, now that his lines were beginning to pay.

Southerland went on, "Seems to me they were discussing your mortgage down at the bank the other day. Someone said they didn't have any use for a barn full of freight gear, wanted to know if I'd bid on it when the note came due."

A presure kicked Webb in the stomach and he felt a slow rising anger. "Martin told me there'd be liberal extensions on that loan if I needed them."

"Apparently Martin's changed his mind," Southerland said. He looked at Webb and the lines of his face grew suddenly sober. "You ought to check with

Martin from time to time, Webb. You're a good freighter, but you can't run a business from the seat of a wagon."

"Maybe not," Webb said bitterly. Then remembering that bitterness wouldn't get him any where he sat back. "Tell you what, Mr. Southerland. I'll throw in eighteen sets of fine harness. You can have everything for eight hundred dollars. You surely can't balk at a bargain like that."

Southerland shook his head, his expression unchanged. "No, Webb. It'd be poor business. The loan runs only five hundred. I expect to pick up the note for less than that."

Webb looked at him and remembered the bad times, the bad luck, and suddenly the wave of bitter discouragement came to him again. "I reckon you're right," He rose stiffly from his chair and took up Helen's package. He moved to the door and turned back, "You better look for a man to replace me, Mr. Southerland. I'll be quitting. Next trip will be my last."

Southerland got up quickly, "You don't want to quit, Webb. We can work out something."

"No, just find a replacement for me, Mr. Southerland. I've had enough."

HE WHIRLED and strode into the clean air outside Southerland's office. The anger began to rise in him again. A man who'd try to take advantage of another man like that deserved to have a pay-roll stolen.

For a moment the memory of Pop Mowery's boy rose in Webb's mind. The kid looked up to Webb. What would a thing like Webb had in mind do to the boy when he found out? Webb thrust the thought angrily aside. Ray Mowery was a foolish kid. And besides, there wasn't any justice in the world; only necessity.

He looked up and saw Bates standing in front of the Commerce Hotel. As if he had been listening to Webb's thoughts, the tall redhead stepped down to the board walk beside him.

"You made up your mind, Parish?"

Webb stared at him and suddenly the anger inside him, burst its bounds. "You're on, Bates. I'm your man. Just see to it that nobody gets hurt."

Three days later at the home station in Dodge City, Pop Mowery and his boy stumbled out to the coach under the weight of a box they carried between them. Webb helped them heave it into the stow boot under the driver's seat and waited while the kid went back to pick up the way bills.

"Thank the Lord it's you, Webb, who's going to ride with this shipment," Pop Mowery said. "It's the biggest one we've ever handled. Six thousand, close to it."

Webb lifted his shotgun out of the boot and laid it over his arm. "Reckon then you'll be riding whip all the way, won't you, Pop?" Webb said casually.

Pop frowned. "We're short of drivers, Webb, and I've got to take another run. They're going to let my boy take this one alone. It's the only route he knows by heart or he could fill in somewhere else."

Webb felt this knowledge hit a tender core within him and he turned to hide this from Pop.

"He's a good boy, Webb," Pop said. "You know that. A little scatter-brained like all kids." Pop turned Webb around. "You look after him, Webb. I'm sure countin' on you doin, that."

The kid came out then, wearing a gun. Pop moved off and the kid came up to Webb, smiling. "Maybe we'd ought to have a troop of cavalry with us, eh Webb?" He took a hitch in the gun-belt.

"Yeah," Webb said sourly. He crossed to the waiting stage and began inspecting the horses that a stocktender had driven out from the livery. He straightened the reins and felt the belly bands for tightness.

"Hitch 'em up, kid," he said stiffly. "Let's get going."

They drove the coach onto Front Street where the passengers for Dalhart had gathered. Webb arranged their luggage in the rear boot, making mental notes of the people for whom he would be re-

sponsible for. He thought briefly of his agreement with Bates, and thought of Pop's foolish kid riding whip. He wondered how in hell a man rated this kind of luck.

Webb loaded the passengers, two business men and their wives. Then he climbed up beside the kid and they drove south out of town.

At their first rest hault that night the women slept inside the coach and the men curled up in blankets on the ground After the others were asleep Webb spread his blanket next to the boy's.

"What you aim to do with that artillery you been carryin' all day?" Webb asked.

"Got to carry it somewhere," the kid said through the darkness. "Might as well wear it."

"Better put it away, son. I can handle this scatter gun. That's always been enough."

Webb closed his eyes and before dropping off his thoughts turned to Helen. The color had come back to her face and her eyes had shown secret excitement when he had told her they'd be leaving. "We'll go back to St. Louis for awhile," Webb had said. "Maybe I can get into something there."

SHE had said, "But what about the money, Webb?" "And your wagons and freight contract? That's what you've always wanted. We can't quit now."

"This country's no good," Webb had lied. "I can sell my wagons and equipment for almost what I got in them. We can find something better."

Helen had been too happy to risk further questions, and Webb had been so pleased with her reaction that he hadn't thought much about the way he intended getting the money.

He rolled over and drew the blanket tight around him. Three thousand dollars, he thought. That would sure go a long way toward setting a man up in business. He thought of the kid then, and what Pop Mowery had said back in Dodge—"I'm glad it's you that's ridin' shotgun," and he had meant it.

Webb knew the trust Pop placed in him. He knew something of the love Pop felt for this boy. And Webb realized now that if anything went wrong with this deal, if anything happened to the boy, he'd be a long time getting over it.

But he couldn't back out now. Not after getting Helen's hopes up. Quitting this deal would mean a kind of disappointment from which Helen might never recover. No, he had to go through with it and at the same time he had to protect this kid.

The sun was a dodging red disk in the west when they pulled into the flats that last day. The kid set his brakes tight and hopped down.

"Fifteen minutes!" he yelled to the passengers. "Stretch your legs but don't wander off too far. We'll be in Dalhart on time."

Webb slid the scatter-gun into its boot and took out his pipe. "You take a walk, kid," he said. "I'll go when you get back."

The women passengers crossed over to a grove of cotton-wood behind the hill and the men moved down the gouged creek bottom to a stand of willows.

Up on the slope Bates stepped out from behind a clay slab. Farther up his horse moved down into sight, pulling bunches of sparse grass.

Webb looked up at the man. You made it, he said to himself. I was hoping you wouldn't. The thought was like a solid hoof in his stomach. Then he heard the kid beside the front wheel and he knew with sudden stiffness that the boy hadn't taken that walk.

Bates moved down the slope, grinning cautiously. "Well, Parish, you ready to do business?" He was holding a gun.

Webb glanced around, his lips tightening, "Forget you heard that, kid!"

The hurt was already working in the boy's quick mind and he was moving toward his own gun in his warbag.

Webb shouted, "You'll get hurt, kid!"

Webb's warning reached Bates and the man dropped behind a rock. The kid fired and his shot kissed the flat surface of the rock and whined off. He swore and pulled the hammer back again.

Webb rose now and kicked the gun from the kid's hand. The boy landed in deep sand between the coach wheels, stunned.

Bates rose and came on. His eyes showed surprise, but a strange confidence too, now that the kid was out of the way. Webb had bent to lift the strong-box over the side when a bullet from Bates slatted the undercarriage of the coach. Bates said something to the boy.

Webb straightened suddenly.

A woman passenger screamed from the crest of the hill, sending the frightened horses forward against their traces. There was a blinding crack and the braked coach moved a few feet through the sand.

Webb heard the boy cry out. And he saw then that the heavy wheels had pinched over the kid's legs, trapping him in the sand.

"Hold it, kid!" Webb shouted, going over the side.

Webb understood briefly what he was doing. He was going to release the kid—and the kid was the one witness who could send him to Huntsville with the rest.

BATES stopped a few yards off and grinned down at the boy. He came on, raising the gun to take a pot shot. Webb saw the kill-crazy pattern of the man's mind. He felt a whole shower of despair, and then sudden an edge of hope.

Webb reached the hand brake and clicked it forward all the way. The coach rolled over the kid, releasing him. And the kid clawed ground, seeking cover.

Bates fired.

A great tower of dirt rose near the boy, missing him by inches. And Bates raised the gun again.

As the coach rolled past, Webb lifted his shotgun from the wagon boot. He brought it around and fired from his shoulder. The heavy ten-gauge boomed, scattering shot in a wide pattern. Bates staggered back, dropping his hand gun in the said.

Webb moved forward slowly. Bates fell to one knee, wiping the stinging shock from his hands. Webb hammered back the second barrel and Bates, glancing up, suddenly had got to his feet and was running up slope to his horse.

He mounted and rode off, his dust cutting south toward Dalhart and then suddenly switching to the west, as though he had changed his mind. He was heading for the Border, Webb decided.

The boy wasn't hurt badly. His legs were bruised but he climbed to the high seat beside Webb and they took the stage in on time.

Webb remained silent while the kid reported the incident to Southerland. Several people had gathered and the four passengers stood beside their luggage.

Webb waited for the boy to tell the part that would send him to Hunstville and when he didn't Webb moved forward.

"There's one other thing you ought to know—" he began.

"Yeah," the boy interrupted. "There was something else, Mr. Southerland. In the excitement I lost my head. Webb here, saved my life. Ain't that what you were goin' to tell, Webb?"

Webb saw the same deep-seated admiration in the boy's eager face and he knew that if this kid could understand, he wouldn't need to explain to the others. "No," Webb said. "I was going to put it the other way around."

"Well, you both deserve a raise," Southerland declared, and grinned. "And what about that notice you gave me, Webb? Does that still hold?"

"No," Webb said flatly. "I guess I'll be staying on, and now, if it's all the same to you, I'll be getting home."

Going into the parlor that night, Webb wondered how he would break the news to Helen. He had decided to tell her everything, but when he saw her, he changed his mind. She had on a bright new dress made from the material he'd bought for her, and a secret joy seemed to give her new strength and endurance.

Her thin arms went around his neck and she kissed him. "Webb, I thought

you'd never get home," she whispered.

Webb held her, and knew he couldn't tell her, not then. . . .

The next morning they were sitting in the parlor and Webb was trying to find a gentle way of putting the harsh news when Cy Southerland and a stranger came to the door. Webb recognized Cy, and, frowning, opened the door.

Southerland and the man with him stepped inside. Webb recognized the other man now—one of the passengers who had witnessed the stage hold-up.

"This is John Meadows," Southerland said formally. He took off his hat and nodded to Helen. "He wants to talk to you, Webb, about last night."

They all sat down and Webb felt a cold fear as the man began.

"I guess there's no use making a stump speech, Mr. Parish. My intentions are quite clear. I came out here to bid on your mortgaged freight outfit, but after the way you handled things last night, saving that boy and all, I decided I didn't want to freeze you out. I thought maybe we could form a partnership. I could handle the sales end of the business and develop my contacts in the East and you could run the local office, hiring the help and taking charge of the drivers and guards." He glanced directly at Webb, his words obviously truthful. "I don't mind telling you, Mr. Parish, this is quite a large company I have in mind. That's why I need the best men I can find."

SOUTHERLAND interrupted, "One thing about it, Webb. Mr. Meadows, here, isn't afraid to spend money. He's already offered to buy me out and I'm thinking seriously about taking his offer."

Meadows glanced at Helen, then back at Webb. "Well, how does it sound, Mr. Parish?"

Webb cleared his throat, felt the tightness and looked across at Helen.

"No, I guess not," he said. "My wife and I were pretty set on leaving here."

Helen frowned. "But we couldn't turn down an opportunity like this, Webb," she said seriously.

"But you were the one who wanted to leave."

"Not now," Helen said, smiling. "Not with you home every night. I'll like it here just fine."

Webb smiled. "Well, there's your answer, Meadows."

As they stood up and shook hands on the deal Webb sensed that a string of good luck was starting for him, one that might last for a long time.

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Wild Blood

A True Story by D. Aydelotte

The notorious outlaw, Henry Starr, robbed just one bank too many

HERDED ALONG by armed horsemen, a bunch of ashen-faced bank officials came stumbling up the littered alley. Like men in a trance, they moved stiffly, seeing nothing, feeling only the paralyzing imminence of violent death at the muzzles of those leveled guns.

Earlier that same day, a covered wagon, with a few saddle horses tied on behind, had rolled slowly through the Oklahoma prairie town. Movers being all too common a sight, sidewalk loafers had eyed the shabby outfit indifferently and returned to their argufying. If they had taken a closer look at the sloe-eyed, black-haired man who sat beside the driver, a rifle across his knees, the word would have traveled like a rushing wind across the plains.

"It's Henry Starr!"

A Name to Conjure With

At the sound of that dread name, citizens would have armed, bank doors would have been guarded, and the robbers under Henry's leadership would have been met by the posse's flaming guns. But no one

guessed that Henry, known as the Bear Cat because of his stealth and cunning, was about to pounce.

The raid had been planned weeks ahead, down to the last detail. Starr and his band struck without warning, looting Stroud's two banks at the same time. A lookout, or outside man, took up his post at each bank door. Two men, their guns hidden, sauntered inside the bank buildings. At that moment three men spurred their rearing horses up the street, yelling wildly and shooting at every head they saw.

"Bank robbers!" called a shrill, excited voice. A confusion of shouts and yells arose as angry citizens ran for their weapons, while bullets kicked up the dust around them.

The commotion waked young Paul Curry, stealing a snoose in the back room of his father's store. Running to the door, he saw a sight that set his heart to pounding. Men he knew, men who worked in the town's banks or owned them, were being herded along like cattle, guns at their backs. No need asking what had happened. He knew—knew by the bulky canvas bags tied to the saddles. And he knew the man riding in the lead, his Indian features impassively calm. Henry Starr!

Fast and furious shooting was going on out in front. But why didn't somebody come and pot those robbers before they got away with their hostages? If he had his pa's Winchester . . . He turned as his father appeared, clutching a rifle. Trembling with excitement, his parent took wavering aim.

"Here," said the son crisply, "gimme! I'll do your shooting for you."

Casually as he would shoot at a jackrabbit, young Paul fired. His first shot struck Henry Starr in one leg, shattering the bone. He slumped over and toppled from saddle. His comrades milled around. One named Lew Estes leaped down and tried frantically to lift the wounded leader to his horse.

"Straighten me out and go on," sternly ordered Starr.

Estes had one foot in the stirrup when Paul fired again, the bullet piercing the robber's lungs.

Young Man, Unafraid

By this time the gang was in wild flight, cutting fence wires and riding across open fields to reach their hideout in wild blackjack country to the east. Though mortally wounded, Estes put spurs to his horse and joined them.

"Here," he gasped weakly, pointing to a canvas bag tied to his saddle, "you can have my share. I won't be needing it." He swayed, clutched at the saddle-horn, and slid from his horse, dead.

In town, the tumult and the shouting, the mounting furore of excitement, ebbed away. The banks' money was gone, but though several citizens had been slightly nicked in the crossfire, there had been no loss of life. Someone remembered Henry Starr's boast that in all his bank holdups he had never killed a man, and never would.

Perhaps he remembered that strange gun duel, fought on horseback years ago. Heeding the urge of his wild blood, young Starr had staged a solo robbery of several stores. Deputy Len Wilson had been sent to get him. A lone rider galloped across the wind-swept prairie. The deputy drew his rifle from the saddle scabbard.

"Hands up!" he ordered, covering the approaching horseman. "You're under arrest!"

"I ain't afraid of you." The boy facing him scowled. "Go away and lemme alone."

"If you won't surrender," rasped Wilson, furious at this cool defiance, "I'll kill you!"

"All right," retorted Henry. His sloe-black eyes met Wilson's unafraid. "I'll let you shoot first. If you miss, I'll kill you and claim self-defense. Go ahead!"

The deputy took steady aim and fired. The ball whined harmlessly past young Starr's ear.

Stoically calm, Henry put a bullet through Wilson's heart. He wheeled his wiry Indian pony and rode away. But he could never quite forget that figure

sprawled in the dry grass, the fast-glazing eyes that stared up unseeingly, the crimson stain spreading across the dead man's breast. And he vowed to himself that he would never kill another man.

Now, defenseless, with a bullet-shattered leg, Henry Starr was picked up and taken to jail. As soon as he could hobble into court, he was tried and convicted of armed robbery. But after serving several years of his terms, he was pardoned on his promise to reform and lead an honest life. He married, moved to Tulsa, and went into the real estate business. But before long, the respectable dullness of going straight palled upon him. He felt the wild blood surging through his veins again, and craved one more bold adventure. Family and friends were told that he was leaving town on business.

A Doddering Finish

On a winter afternoon, Old Man Meyers, stockholder and former president of a small Arkansas bank, sat before the fire in his cubby-hole of an office, rubbing his shins and gazing out at the wooded countryside. Fine day for squirrel hunting, he mused—sun shining bright, a light snow powdering the ground.

He could fairly see himself tramping the woods, the old squirrel rifle in the crook of one arm, his boots crunching the dead leaves underfoot. His hand was as steady and his aim true as ever. But his folks, and the boys here at the bank, dang 'em, kept hinting he was too old to hunt. Some day he'd show 'em.

He looked fondly at the rifle, his companion on many a hunting trip, leaning near the fireplace. Dozing off briefly, he waked at the sound of the bank door closing, and fumbled for his watch. A voice spoke, but so quietly that he couldn't make out what was said. He cupped a gnarled hand around one ear, listening, but there was no answer. Footsteps sounded. The vault door swung to with its familiar snick! Still no one called out, "Time to lock up, Meyers."

Moving silently in his worn congress gaiters, Old Man Meyers reached for his rifle and pussy-footed to the door of his shadowy office.

A dark-skinned, black-haired man stood at the counter, scooping the bank's money into a bulging canvas sack.

The old man's memory groped, questioning, through the detritus of years. Then he remembered. He had seen that face in the papers many a time.

"Ought to kill the varmit right now," muttered Meyers, "but I'll give him a chance." and he shouted hoarsely, "Hands up!"

The rifle swung to his shoulder. He squinted one eye, sighting along the gleaming barrel.

Henry Starr whirled, his dark gaze widening as he saw this bald, white-bearded apparition. One shot, and he could ride off with his loot to the freedom of which he still dreamed of. Yet he could not do it. He had vowed never to kill another man, and to mow down this old grandpa— He fired, purposely deflecting his aim.

A blast from the squirrel rifle echoed through the room. Henry Starr wavered and fell, a cascade of silver dollars pouring from the open bag.

"Come on out," boomed Old Man Meyers, swinging the heavy vault door open. "Thought I warn't fit to handle a gun, didn't you? Well, you won't be saying it any more."

He stumped over to where the dead bank robber lay, blood gushing from a hole in his breast.

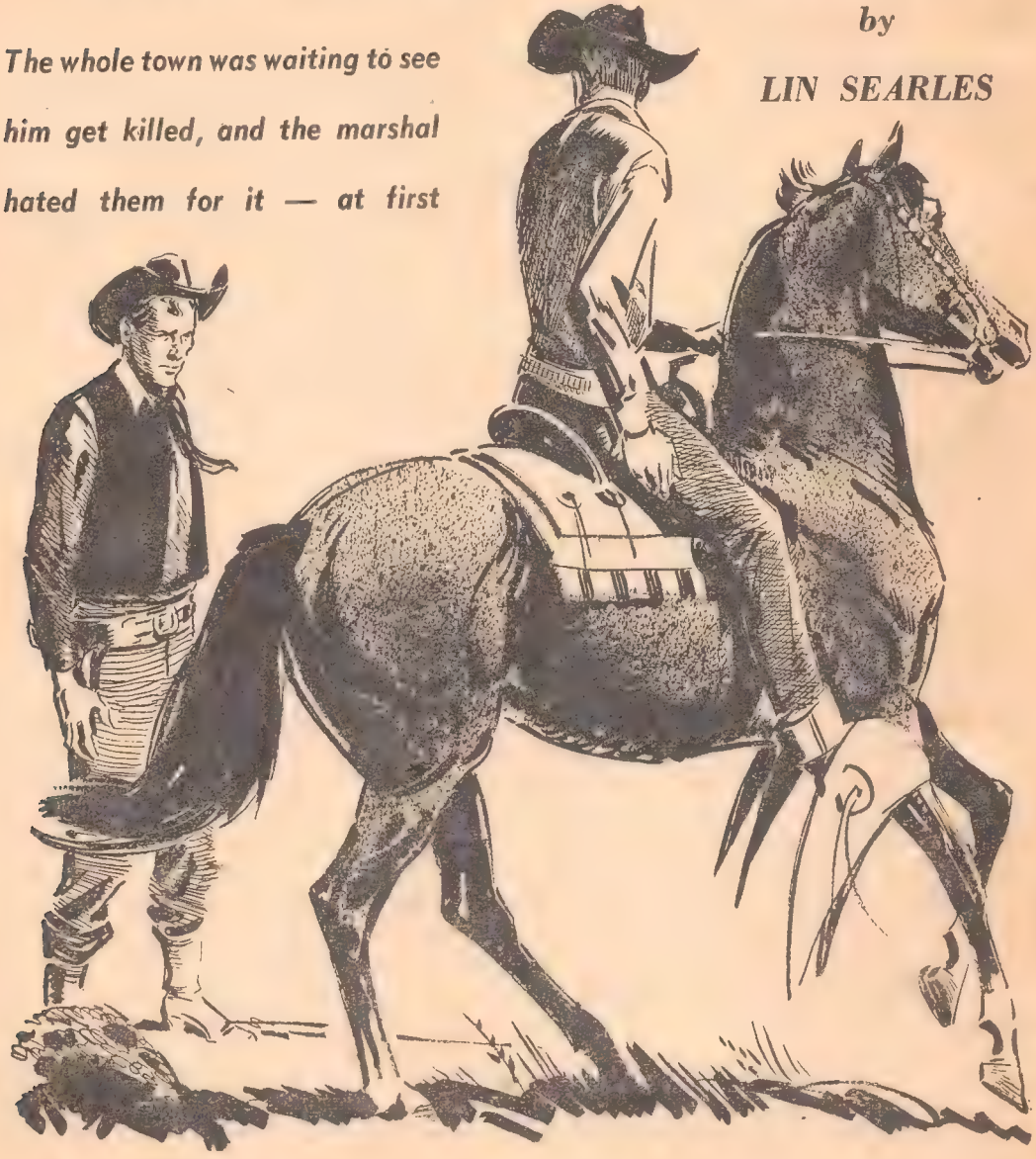
"Maybe I'm old and doddering," he announced, "but I've killed Henry Starr."

THE TWISTED STAR

The whole town was waiting to see him get killed, and the marshal hated them for it — at first

by

LIN SEARLES



DUTCH REICHBACH, returning at a high lope from Lodge Pole Valley, reined his claybank to a dancing halt at Indian Creek bridge. His "Hiiāāh!" cut high and clear through the air's dry stillness and the claybank's hooves drummed a reckless fanfaronade across the bridge's timbers. This was an old and familiar game for both horse and rider. They pulled up at the other end of the bridge, savoring the day's fine moment.

Before them, sprawled the town of Painted Thunder, the red of the nearby schoolhouse standing out sharp against the weather-silvered drabness of the buildings farther away.

"All right, boy," Reichbach murmured to the mount. "Now life becomes serious and earnest again." From his vest pocket he took a silver star, webbed with fine scratches and with one point twisted to an impossible angle. He shook his head doubtfully, swiped the star on the seat of his levis, then pinned it to his vest.

He *chukked* softly to the claybank and held him to a dignified walk down through the heart of the center of Bridge Street.

Abreast of the schoolhouse Reichbach reined in and waited patiently, hands crossed over the saddle-horn.

ALMOST at once the door opened. Eva Colton came out, closing the door carefully behind her, throwing back some last-second admonition that Reichbach couldn't quite hear. Then she ran to meet him.

Reichbach watched the lithe grace of her body, the flow and ripple of her dark hair, her clean-cut features and clear eyes. And, as always, he had his quick intake of breath and his brief moment of wonder that in four more days this girl would become his wife.

Giving her his slow smile, Reichbach took off his hat, waiting for her to speak and knowing what she would say. But he was puzzled when he probed Eva Colton's eyes, for the anxiety and worry in them was not usual.

She said, deep concern breaking through the surface lightness of her tone, "Dutch, I heard you! When are you going to grow up?"

"In four more days," he answered gravely. He started to ask the question that was on his mind, but checked himself. She would answer in her own way and in her own time. Instead he remarked casually, "The floor is down in the new room. You might like to ride out tomorrow. I am considering selling the harvester to the Cassons and ordering one of the new McCormick binders. With that new section of Turkey Red, it will make the harvesting easier."

Eva reached over the gate and patted the claybank's flank. She said, "I'll ride out after school. There must be some measuring done for curtains. Can you get delivery on the binder by August?"

"Hunstedder thinks so."

Eva's hand moved to Reichbach's boot, her fingers traced the design. "Dutch?"

"All right," Reichbach murmured.

"Dutch, there's something going on in town. Some of the boys haven't come to school. They've scented something exciting."

"Medicine show, I reckon," he suggested.

"No. They've been watching for you."

"Another wild drunk," said Reichbach, his voice even. "Nothing to worry about. I'll see you after school." He gave her a quick smile and kneed the claybank forward. When he looked back she was still staring soberly after him.

He kept an even pace along Bridge Street, passing the town's outer reaches and noting idly that the boards had been removed from the doors of two more houses.

Every day a few more, he thought. We are building up again, but this time on a better foundation.

A vagrant dust-devil swirled out of some obscure place to meet him, rippled his shirt, and made a dryness in his nostrils. And in this brief moment Dutch Reichbach was riding in an older time when the sun had hung crimson in the dust of a thousand trail-herds, and the plank walks of Bridge Street had resounded with the trampling of Texas boots and the jangling of spur chains. Violence had run its brawling course throughout the length of the street, and gunfire had filled the town with broad echoes and somewhere a man lay with his face in the dust.

And Dutch Reichbach had breasted this hard-surging tide, a tall man on a tall horse, with his star throwing back flashes of the reddened sunlight. A thousand years ago, Reichbach thought, and the vision was suddenly swept away as he found himself staring at the graying false fronts of the buildings that lined Bridge Street. Like this star I wear. Weather-

scarred and faded and fooling nobody who doesn't wish to be fooled.

Passing Myerson's Bakery he caught the whiff of fresh bread. Suddenly realizing that he was hungry he *chukked* the claybank to a faster pace. From the alley siding the Crystal Hotel Rolph Casson's two tow-headed boys ran into the street. The smallest one pointed his finger at Reichbach, crooked his thumb, and said, "Bang! Bang!"

The older boy called out, "Dutch, you'll get him, won't you, Dutch?"

"Bang—bang!" the smaller boy said again, and before Dutch could say anything they vanished into the alley's shadows.

"Hell!" Reichbach observed gently, and turned the claybank sharply across the street, bringing him up at the tie-rail that fronted Hunstedder's Hardware Store.

HUNSTEDDER'S was a deep, poorly lighted building that hadn't been changed since the old days. Reichbach threaded his way among this hetrogeneous collection of tools and parts and, seeing nobody, made his way to the gun rack. He picked up a .38-40 Winchester, sighted carefully at a dust-covered Argand lamp, then sighed regretfully and replaced the rifle carefully back on the rack.

He called then, his tone carrying no impatience, "Chess!"

"Damn near time," a voice growled faintly from somewhere in the back room, and in a few seconds Chess Hunstedder appeared, his short strides beating a nervous tattoo on the planking.

Hunstedder was a short, graying man with deep-set shrewd eyes that now were blinking rapidly with some hidden excitement. He said in a high-pitched voice, "Thought I'd have to send for you."

Reichbach propped one foot on a nail keg. "As store owner, mayor, or justice of the peace?"

"Damn the store!" Hunstedder snapped. "Man, where've you been? Don't you know Johnny Perrine is in town?"

"So that's the answer," Reichbach said softly. "Sure of your man?"

"Who else ever carried a Army Model Remington with ivory butt plates and naked women carved on them?"

"It's been a long time," Reichbach said musingly. "What's he done?"

"Nothing, so far. Which is not the question. He's a gunman and an ex-convict. Painted Thunder is no place for his kind any more. You've got to do something."

Reichbach said drily, "Just what?"

"Why, hell," Hunstedder said irritably, "you're the man who wears the star. You're the Sun-god on a shining horse. Do anything. Run him out of town. Jail him. Kill him, if you have to."

"Sure," drawled Reichbach, "and while I'm at it, I'll take a pasear south and gun down Wyatt Earp and his brothers, too."

Hunstedder's cheeks reddened. "Say what you want. But what will other towns think of us when they find out we're letting a killer and jailbird stay here? What chance do you think we'll have then of getting the county seat? Get him out of this town, Dutch."

"That an official order, Chess?"

Hunstedder ran a hand through his sparse hair. "Dutch, I'd like to wait until the county sends down the new deputy. But that won't be for three more days, and I'm getting a lot of pressure. This probably will be the last order I'll have to give you."

"All right," Reichbach said. "I'll go see him." He turned and made his way to the door.

"At the New York Saloon!" he heard Hunstedder call after him, and as Reichbach gave a backward glance he saw again the excitement in Hunstedder's eyes. He wondered about that as he crossed the street.

Not a thousand years ago, after all, he thought, and the past is never completely done with. Absently he fingered the bent point of his official star. One of Johnny Perrine's bullets had done that one gun-flaming night when the Texas trail was young, and Reichbach, gun not even yet out of leather, had known the outlaw's second slug would catch him full and square. And it would have, too, if Bat

Masterson hadn't appeared from somewhere out of the shadows behind Perrine, his Colt slicing down ugly and wicked through the yellow light.

No Masterson here this time, Reichbach told himself softly, and realized he was standing in front of the New York's batwing doors. He held himself there a moment, a gaunt, spare figure, his gray eyes shadowed by the wide brim of his dark hat and the star pinned to his vest a lonely spot of twisted brightness against his sober clothing. He let out a small gusty breath and shouldered his way through the doors.

THE New York Saloon was a long narrow room with a thirty-foot bar that business no longer warranted running down one side. Soft yellow light from the hanging Rochester lamps splashed down upon the bar and the forgotten faro tables. Toward the far end of the bar a man's elbow-propped shape made a lonesome silhouette framed against the rear window's ragged light. This man, the lawman thought, surprised at his own calmness would be Perrine.

Finn McCool, the bartender, came from some place behind the counter. He gave Reichbach a guarded look and said, "St. Louis beer today. Cold."

"That will taste good," said Reichbach. He spun a coin on the bar's age-darkened surface and listened to its soft-whirring song rise and die.

Finn McCool put the beer down in front of him, saying in a tightened voice, "Him down there. Been here all day drinking, not saying a word. Enough to drive a man crazy. Haven't been able to touch a drop myself all day."

"The day of prophecy," Reichbach drawled, "has arrived."

"Not funny, Dutch," McCool said. "Trouble is riding this way."

"I'll talk to him. Keep out of the way, Finn."

"Just one more thing," said McCool.

"What's that?"

"Even after six years in Leavenworth, Dutch, he's still faster."

"Don't aim to make him prove it," Reichbach said gently. He added then, "Thanks, Finn," took a long draught of the beer and stepped away from the bar, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

He shot a quick look at Johnny Perrine who was still slouched over the bar, completely absorbed in some distant world that only his eyes could see. Play it careful now, Reichbach told himself. Play it soft and cool and careful.

He moved down the bar's length in steady, even strides, letting his boot heels strike hard and solid upon the deadening sawdust.

When he had only three more paces to go, Johnny Perrine, not looking up, said quietly, "That's far enough."

"Hello, Johnny," Reichbach said.

Perrine glanced up then, his face, not having yet regained its tan, looking sharper with its pallor than Reichbach remembered it to have been. His pale blue eyes held a puzzled recollection, then his gaze fell to the twisted star and he said. "You were lucky that time, my friend."

"Way the cards fall," Reichbach replied.

"Slow," said Johnny Perrine. "You were way too slow." He straightened then and turned to face Reichbach whose gaze automatically dropped to Perrine's gun. The Army Model Remington with the carved ivory butt-plates, a little more yellowed now, rode high and easy in the worn loop holster.

"Same gun." Johnny Perrine smiled.

"No doubt," agreed Reichbach. "Nobody is likely to forget it. Johnny, I have something to ask you."

"No!" Johnny Perrine said quickly. "The hell with you! The hell with all of you! I used my gun, and I paid my debt. And I thought that now I could come out and live with people. But I've ridden into a hundred towns and been hounded out of a hundred towns. Now I'm tired of it. I'll go, maybe, but I'll pick my own time and I won't be driven."

"Put your gun away then," Reichbach said.

Johnny Perrine raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Why, hell, that would be cheating

the honest and upright citizens. Without my gun, I wouldn't be Johnny Perrine. And what would the vultures feed on then?"

"A bad philosophy, Johnny," Reichbach observed gently. "People aren't that bad."

Johnny Perrine's eyes opened wide in genuine surprise. "After being a lawman around fifteen years, you can still think that? No, Reichbach, I'll stay until you have to come after me—and when you do you'll have to come smoking."

"Different opinion here," said Reichbach. "Take my advice, Johnny. Leave town quietly. Go somewhere where you aren't known. You haven't caused any trouble yet. Don't cause any."

"Why not now, Reichbach? You'll have to face me some time. Why not now?"

"No. No on both counts."

JOHNNY PERRINE grinned lop-sidedly. "You'll come, and I'll be here to meet you. You can't beat it, and I can't beat it. So I'll see you later when the stage is set and the audience has gathered."

"Still your opinion," said Reichbach. "So long, Johnny. Remember my advice." He shrugged and turned away, seeing no point in this conversation.

"Marshal," Perrine called mockingly, "I'll tell you why you'll have to face me. You ever stopped to figure why people go to bullfights?"

"It has passed through my mind," Reichbach said soberly, not turning around.

"Think on it some more," said Johnny Perrine, and his sardonic chuckle followed Reichbach down the length of the bar.

Reichbach thought then of the look he had seen in Mayor Hunstedder's eyes. By the time he had pushed through the batwings and out onto Bridge Street's planking he found himself wondering if perhaps Johnny Perrine wasn't right.

He recrossed the street, to where Hunstedder was waiting for him at the doorway of the store.

Hunstedder said sourly, "Well, I don't see Perrine, and I didn't hear shooting."

Reichbach laid a measured glance against the mayor. "Disappointed, Chess?"

"Oh, hell," Hunstedder said, "you're getting proddy. What happened?"

"We talked some. He'll go, but wants to pick his time."

Hunstedder gave him a shrewd glance. "That all?"

"That's all," Reichbach answered flatly. "When the next move is made, I'll let you know." He turned and mounted the claybank, leaving Hunstedder's next question hanging in the air.

Leaving the claybank at White's place, he walked back, looking in at Levison's Mercantile to see if Eva Colton might be there, shopping. Then he stopped at Won Tun's and had steak and eggs. Feeling some better, he stopped in at the jail to do some paper work. He wrote three letters then tilted his chair back, propped his feet on the desk and tipped his hat over his eyes. In a few minutes he was asleep.

It seemed that he had closed his eyes for only a few minutes when he was awakened by Eva Colton saying, "This, mister, is proof of women's theory as to how men spend their working hours!"

"Huh," Reichbach grunted, dragging his feet off the desk. He managed to stand and take off his hat, shaking his head to drive out the sleep.

"An intelligent answer," observed Eva. "It is supper time. Come over to the house and I'll feed you." Her tone held an easy lightness, but Reichbach could sense an anxious quality underneath.

He shook his head. "Have a small chore to do. I'll have to wait around."

Eva came around the desk and put her hands on his shoulders. "All right, Dutch, I made my try. A woman has a right to that."

Reichbach bent down and took his kiss, feeling the small trembling she couldn't quite hide. He straightened, looked down at her, smiling, and said softly, "Don't worry. Never, never worry."

Her arms tightened around him; she wouldn't let him go.

"Couldn't you just refuse to do anything?"

"Beyond that now. Once I could have walked away. Once all I had was a gun and a star and a dirty job. Now I have grown roots here. Now I have a farm and soon I'll have a wife, and how long could I face my neighbors?"

Eva stepped away from him and gave him a small smile. "All right, Dutch. You'll stop by—when it's over?"

"I'll stop by," he said gravely.

She laid her hand on his arm for a moment, then walked rapidly out the door. And as Reichbach watched her retreating figure, slim and straight in the sun's waning afterglow, he wondered if she had probed the dark corners of his mind and discovered his wavering faith.

WITH this thought lying heavy upon him, he passed through the hallway and out to the back of the jail. There he levered the pump and sloshed water over his head and face. He was snorting gustily when Sam White, who acted as jailer when one was needed, found him.

White said shakily, "Well, if this was what you were waiting for you've got it. Perrine's on the prod at the New York. Made McCool open a faro table, lost all his cash twice, took it back twice. Now he's dragged every man who passed the door inside. He's got 'em lined up at the bar, making McCool set 'em up. I sneaked out the back door while he was blasting holes in the faro box."

"Drunk?"

"Roostered. He's wearing calluses on his elbows."

"Good," said Reichbach. He took a bandanna from his back pocket and wiped his face. "Stay here, Sam. I'll need you on the job tonight."

"I doubt it," White said glumly. "But I'll wait."

"Just you do that," Reichbach said sharply. He angled through the back lot and into Custer Alley, heading for the New York's back entrance. The strain that had gripped him was washed away in the flooding relief of action. This was what he had been waiting for.

At back entrance to the New York he paused just long enough to make sure of his path, then made his way through the storeroom, carefully avoiding the jumbled collection of old beer kegs and whisky barrels. He halted in the deeper shadows of the narrow hallway that led into the barroom. He saw Johnny Perrine point an unsteady finger at the man nearest the swing doors and heard him say, "Now go get your damned marshal!"

Reichbach drew his gun and stepped out into the sullen silence of the room.

"Bring them up slow and easy, Johnny. You've had your fun."

Johnny Perrine's back stiffened. He brought his hands up slowly, too slowly. He turned to face Reichbach, his body moving soft and easy and deadly, and the butt of his gun traced a lazy saffron arc around him.

"Way up," Reichbach cautioned. "I'll take no chances with you, Johnny."

"I guess not," Perrine said, and his smile was mocking. "You're cheating the customers, Marshal."

Reichbach moved swiftly forward, not taking his eyes from Perrine's. He said, "I'll take that gun now," and at that moment somebody at the bar dropped a glass and swore nervously. Reichbach's glance flickered for that brief space of time—and he saw anticipation leap to Perrine's eyes, and saw Perrine's shoulder drop. The lawman brought his gun up, then down in a great, slashing smash. He heard Perrine's long drawn-out, "A-a-a-h!" and watched Perrine crumple and sprawl half across the oilcloth layout on the splintered faro table.

Somebody at the bar said huskily, "By hell, I don't want to go through that again!"

Reichbach let his gun fall back into leather and allowed himself the luxury of a deep breath. He pointed to the nearest man.

"You, Rolph, help me carry Perrine over to the jail. Somebody go tell Hunstedder what's happened."

He bent over Perrine, listened to his breathing, and brushed back the hair from the already discoloring welt. "His hat

will sit uneasy a few days," he murmured. "Come on, Rolph."

Sam White opened the jail door for them, saying softly, "Well, I'll be everlastingly damned!"

"Open that cell door," Reichbach said. "Take that gun-belt off Perrine first, and put it in the desk."

With Perrine deposited on the cell bunk and the door clanged shut, Rolph Casson said finally, "That all, Dutch?"

"That's all. Thanks, Rolph."

"I'll feel a lot better when he's out of town," Casson said, and went out into the night.

"What now?" Sam White asked.

"Hold him here tonight. Put him on the stage tomorrow—without his gun. I'll be here at stage time to be sure he gets on. I'll send his gun and belt to Lincoln by the next stage."

PERRINE'S voice called thickly, "You're dead, Marshal. You know that, don't you?"

"Sleep it off, Johnny," said Reichbach. "You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Hell with you!" muttered Perrine.

"Have Doc Turlock look at that head in the morning, Sam," said Reichbach. And as he closed the door behind him he heard Johnny Perrine calling again, "You're dead, Marshal."

He made his way down Bridge, now a lonesome channel filled with a darkness relieved only by the splinters of light from the New York Saloon and the Crystal Hotel. He cut across Fremont, and turned in where a faded sign read:

Mrs. Benson's Boarding House.

There was still a light at Eva Colton's window, and he tossed a pebble and heard its faint ping against the glass. The window was opened immediately, and he could see Eva's slim silhouette outlined against the light.

"All right," he called softly. "It's all right."

He heard her relieved sigh and her whispered, "Good night," turned, and made his way back to Bridge Street. He made his usual rounds, looked in again at the jail, then headed for White's Livery. The night hostler brought out the claybank.

Reichbach mounted and rode out into the night's quiet with a vague foreboding pressing his consciousness. He felt that there was something he had overlooked and thought, It was too easy. That thought was a heavy pressure upon him all the way back to the farm, and far into the night.

Reichbach awoke with a sense of urgency riding him. He breakfasted hurriedly, then saddled the claybank and rode out into a misty gray morning. He glanced at his old Horologe and discovered he had forgotten to wind it; he squinted at the sky's somber heaviness, finding no lighter cast, and finally gave up in irritated disgust. He kept the claybank at a fast lope all the way into Painted Thunder, his mood as dark as the morning.

Passing the Crystal Hotel he heard somebody call, "Dutch, oh Dutch!" In this morning's dankness, he could not see who it was, and he pressed on, not stopping until he reined in at the jail.

He tried the door. It was locked. He called, "Sam!" and got no answer, and called twice again. He fished in the pocket of his levis then and found the key. He heard somebody's fast-striding tread on the board walk as he threw the door open. White wasn't there, and the cell door was ajar.

Johnny Perrine wasn't there either.

Reichbach swore softly, using words he thought he had long forgotten in these gentler days. He crossed to the desk and yanked the drawer open.

"No use looking," Rolph Casson said from the doorway.

Reichbach swung around, pivoting around the desk in one lunging movement. He grabbed Casson's shirt at the collar and demanded, "What happened?"

"Hell!" Casson said aggrievedly. "Don't jump down my throat. I didn't have nothing to do with it."

Reichbach stepped back, releasing his grip. "Sorry, Rolph. I'm proddy. Where's Perrine?"

"Hunstedder stopped in early this morning, White said, with Doc Turlock. Perrine promised to leave town, and Chess held court right here, fined Perrine twenty-five dollars and told White to let him out."

"And gave him back his gun?" Reichbach asked incredulously.

"He was wearing it when I saw him at Won Tun's a few minutes ago."

"That's just fine," said Reichbach. "Just damn fine!"

"Whole street's waiting for it to happen, Dutch. They're like kids who haven't seen a circus in a long time. What are you going to do?"

"What," snapped Reichbach, "would *you* do?" He pushed roughly past Casson, covering the distance to the claybank in huge, reaching strides. He swung up into saddle with one violent surge and spurred the claybank at a hard gallop down Bridge, leaving Casson staring open-mouthed after him.

HE HELD a course straight down Bridge's mist-shrouded length, passing Hunstedder's and the Mercantile and Won Tun's, throwing back a quick look as he passed the eating place. The street, empty before, now was peopled with Painted Thunder's curiosity-driven life, the distant forms of men stippling an unreal pattern in this morning's clouded obscurity. He knew what these people were thinking, and he didn't care.

At the outer reaches of Painted Thunder the buildings petered out, the road narrowed and angled gently off toward the Swallowtails. Reichbach kept a steady course until he raised the fork where the Lincoln Stage Road cut through. Here he swung the claybank off into a stand of box elders that marked the juncture. Here he off-saddled and checked the loads in his gun. He rolled a cigarette and watched the mist swirling around the tree tops.

He was on his second cigarette when he heard the distant thunder of hoofbeats drumming up a measured cadence along the Painted Thunder road. He thought, I

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guessed right, and loosened his gun in holster. He waited until the rider swept past the box elders and pulled up sharply at the fork of the road. The marshal stepped full out into the road then, and his voice carried cool and clear through the haze:

"Light down, Johnny. Light down, and we'll finish this the way it has to end."

Johnny Perrine reined his livery-stable bangtail around facing Reichbach. He rested both hands carefully on the saddle-horn and said, "You're rough on a man, Reichbach. Damned rough. I've got a headache that was built for a horse."

"Light down," Reichbach said again. "Let's get this over with, Johnny."

"I was right, Marshal. You know what they were thinking?"

"I can guess."

"They said you were running out. I figured they were wrong. I knew why you came out here. You'd give Painted Thunder no Roman Holiday."

Reichbach said irritably, "Get the hell down and fill your hand!"

Johnny Perrine shook his head. "Why? Where's the audience? What would it get me to fill your gut with lead with only the roadrunners and prairie dogs to watch? Think on this, Reichbach. How many gunfights can you recall that didn't take place in a town? The town pushed you, and my name pushed me. Out here we have no quarrel. No, Marshal, I won't draw on you."

Reichbach said, puzzled, "What now then?"

"Why," answered Perrine, "I will find myself another town and maybe another man to kill. You can't be Johnny Perrine and avoid that. I've discovered that along this last trail."

"Then don't be Johnny Perrine any more. Your name throws too big a shadow. You've got too big a reputation to live up to. Become somebody else."

Johnny Perrine leaned forward in the saddle. "Who?"

"Try Smith," Reichbach said, smiling. "It's a good name."

"Johnny Smith," Perrine whispered. "A new name and a new start."

"You can pick up the stage here," Reichbach said. "I'll take your horse back."

Johnny Perrine said, "They won't believe you." He swung down from saddle and dropped the reins to the ground. He faced Reichbach squarely and his hand flashed and was suddenly filled with blue steel and yellowed ivory. He laughed at Reichbach's look of frank surprise, rolled the gun forward and back around his fingers, sent it spinning to his other hand and back again, blending all the motions into one scintillating pattern of gun-skill.

"Take this," he said then. "Take this back to town with you and say nothing and let them have their own thoughts."

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Reichbach said, oddly touched by this gesture, "Johnny, I—"

"It would look better if it were fired first," Johnny Perrine said. "Toss me your star, Marshal."

REICHBACH, not understanding, hesitated a moment, then unpinned the star from his vest and tossed it to Perrine. He waited silently, faintly puzzled, wondering what was in the man's mind.

Johnny Perrine pushed one point of the star into the damp ground. Then he stepped back and sighted carefully along the barrel of the Remington. Gunfire blasted the morning's stillness, gunfire sent its broad echoes rolling over the land. At the third shot the star leaped into the air, tracing a violent-spinning arc until it settled to earth again.

Johnny Perrine picked it up and handed it to Reichbach.

Reichbach said softly, "Well, I'm damned."

The star was still faded and scratched, and a new scar ran diagonally across its face. But it was no longer twisted; and Reichbach understood now what this gesture had meant to Johnny Perrine.

"Makes us even," Johnny Perrine said. He holstered the Remington, took off the gun-belt off and hung it over his saddle-horn.

Reichbach mounted the claybank then.

"So long, Johnny," he said to the gunman. And in a moment he added, "Smith."

Then he reined the claybank out into the road. In the saddle of the bangtail beside him a fugitive ghost rode high and proud and the Remington's ivory handle was the color of a dead world.

He knew the answer then. Painted Thunder was not cruel or vicious. It was a town that had grown too violently and too fast. And a secret desire to return to those days had not yet become a time-mellowed and faded memory.

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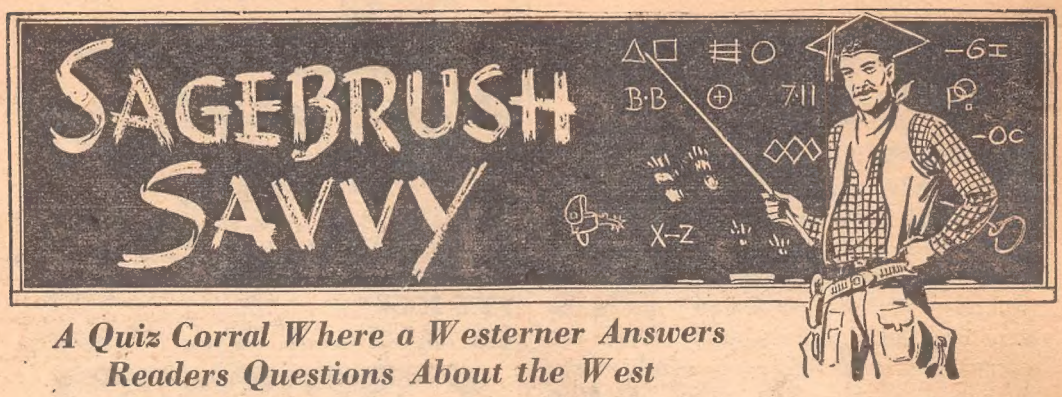

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers Questions About the West

Q.—What and where is Kit Carson's Cave? —C.W.W. (Okla.).

A.—When Col. Kit Carson was sent by the government in 1863 to round up the Navajo tribe and take them into captivity at the Bosque Redondo near Ft. Sumner, N.M., he camped with his soldiers in a rather roomy cave in the red sandstone cliffs about six miles northeast of the present town of Gallup, N.M., taking shelter there from a several days' storm.

Q.—Where could I see some of the abandoned "ghost towns" out West?—C.A. (Ohio).

A.—You'll find at least some of the following listed on tourist road maps. In California —Carson Hill, Skidoo, Bodie and Tuttletown. In Nevada—Aurora, Goldfield, Midas and Candelaria. In Oregon—Browntown and French Flat. In Washington—Fidalgo City and Loop Loop. In Idaho—Leesburg and Florence. In Montana—Diamond City and Alder Gulch. In Utah—Harrisburg and Ophir. In Wyoming—South Pass City and Bothwell. In Colorado—Oro City, Sunshine, Silver Cliff and Tarryall. In Arizona—Blue Bell, Tip Top, Paradise and White Hills. In New Mexico—Shakespeare, White Oaks, Elizabethtown, Alma and Albemarle. There are dozens and dozens more.

Q.—What is the difference between a National Park and a National Monument?—C.V.M. (R.I.).

A.—In general, National Monuments are more numerous and smaller in area than National Parks, or are considered of less historical, geological, archeological or scenic importance. Both are managed by the National Park Service for the benefit and convenience of visitors

Q.—Who was in command of the Texans at the siege of the Alamo?—Jane L. (Miss.).

A.—Col. William Barrett Travis. In a dispatch urging the Texas Provisional Government to send aid to the beleaguered garrison Travis wrote: "I shall never surrender or retreat"—and he didn't.

Q.—I have heard that "New Mexico" is the oldest state name in the U.S. Is this correct? —O.F.J. (Ill.).

A.—In its Spanish form, "Nuevo Méjico" (Noo-AY-voh MAY-hee-coh), New Mexico is second only to Florida in the age of its name. Both were named by Spanish *conquistadores* in the early 1500's. Incidentally, Florida, now quite a cow country as well as winter haven for shivery northerners, means "flowery," and by the Spaniards was pronounced Flo-REE-thah.

Q.—What is the really correct way to pronounce "rodeo?"—D.L.S. (N.J.).

A.—I think I've answered this one before, but here goes: "Rodeo" is a Spanish word meaning "roundup." The strictly correct Spanish pronunciation is ro-THAY-oh. But the buckaroos who kick up arena dust in modern cowboy contests, and the folks who watch them call it RO-dee-oh. So that's it, unless you're talking Spanish. The famous early day rodeo promoter, Tex Austin, made a valiant effort to educate people to say ro-THAY-oh, but he couldn't make it stick. From this came ro-DAY-oh, still another common variation.

Q.—Are there any diamond mines in the West?—Diamond Dick (Mich.).

A.—The only natural diamond mine in the U.S. is at Murfreesboro, Ark.

—S. Omar Barker

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